

JILL DARLING

# GEOGRAPHIES OF IDENTITY

Narrative Forms,  
Feminist Futures



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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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Many people have helped shape this project over the years. It began as a dissertation, an initial draft completed while I was a PhD student at Wayne State University. I couldn't have completed the book in that form without the insight and assistance of Barrett Watten. The project also began before that, when I was an MFA student at Colorado State University and started delving into questions of form, content, poetics, and more. And maybe it began even before that when I learned to recognize and articulate feminism, in theory and practice, as an undergrad at the University of Detroit Mercy. Thanks to my teachers and classmates over the years who led me to books and conversation that contributed to my thinking and reading over the years. And

great thanks especially to: Laura Mullen, Jonathan Flatley, renée hoogland, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Meike Zwingenberger, Heike Paul, Kristine Danielson, Judith Lakämper, Michael Schmidt, Laura Wetherington, Michelle Pierce, and Veronica Corpuz. And thanks also to Sarah Gzemski for publishing an early draft of the chapter on Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* and some of my other cultural poetics essays on the Arizona Poetry Center blog. I would also, of course, thank my parents, Fran and Dave Darling for their continuous encouragement, and my partner Gabe Cherry for everything.

I'd like to also acknowledge the cover art, an image of the Black Hills, taken from the "Geological map of the Black Hills of Dakota" by Henry Newton, published in 1879 by the Department of the Interior. Land that included the Black Hills was promised to the Sioux people in the Fort Laramie Treaty in 1868. But when gold was discovered there in the 1870s, Custer's army invaded, seeking to take control of the land for exploration and mining. He was killed, and his army defeated, in the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, though it was a short-lived victory for the tribes of the Sioux Nation. The land was shortly thereafter taken by the US government. Tribes with ancestral ties to the Black Hills are today still fighting for the terms of the Laramie Treaty to be honored. The image reproduced here does not include the topographical notations and place names from the 1879 map, leaving only the colors representing geological layers, and potentially imagining the re-narrativization and re-inhabiting of the space. South Dakota and the Black Hills are important figures in Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS*, the subject of the last chapter of this book. The cover image points to that, and to a wider sense of geography as historical, layered, sometimes violent, and potentially hopeful in its reseeing, reclaiming, or retelling.

The cover image is also a visual land acknowledgement in recognition of Native ancestral lands more widely and the history of violence against Native people across what is now the US. As a project utilizing the concept of geography and one grounded in American cultural studies, it's important at the opening of this book to recognize that. Like the Crazy Horse Monument in

the Black Hills whose work will never be finished, geographical landscapes are always in process and evolving. The visual geography might also symbolize a necessary spiritual and literal reclaiming, to acknowledge and turn/return, to voice old or new stories otherwise historically silenced or made invisible. In *WHEREAS*, Long Soldier turns the language of empty promises of us government treaties against itself and in its place offers a narrative that isn't new, but that has largely gone unheard. Acknowledging and re-narrating might also potentially point us toward new and better futures.

Much gratitude also to the publications in which earlier versions of some of these chapters have been included:

- “‘I am I because my little dog knows me,’ or, the Rhetoric of (Non)narrative (Queer)identity in Gertrude Stein’s *Geographical History*.” *the quint: an interdisciplinary journal from the north* 9, no. 2 (March 2017): 44–71.
- “A Crisis of Memory: Narrative Form and Identity-Construction in Pamela Lu’s ‘Pamela: A Novel’” *Ethos: A Digital Review of Arts, Humanities, and Public Ethics* 3, no. 1 (2017): 4–17.
- “On re-reading, and teaching, Layli Long Soldier’s ‘WHEREAS.’” 1508: *The University of Arizona Poetry Center Blog*. February 2020. <https://poetry.arizona.edu/blog/re-reading-and-teaching-layli-long-soldier%E2%80%99s-whereas>.



## INTRODUCTION

# The Form and Content of Cultural Identity

*Geographies of Identity: Narrative Forms, Feminist Futures* explores literal and figurative landscapes of identity in innovative, non/narrative writing by women. Writing through linguistic and cultural geographies, sexual borders, and spatial topographies, authors of the texts explored here offer non-prescriptive models for going beyond linear narrative forms to create textual webs that reflect the realities of multi-ethnic, multi-oriented, multi-linguistic cultural experiences. My readings examine how a number of twentieth and twenty-first century women writers construct texts whose subjects mediate identity and call for increased possibilities for subject-identification in the world; the subjects act as fictional, non-fictional, and poetic narrators, sometimes all within single texts, and they call our attention as readers to identity and subject construction through innovative blending of form and content. The formal strategies and experiment with narrative, combined with the content of cultural identity and critique, result in creative and political projects that variously explore gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and language in relation to contemporary American culture. Gertrude Stein's *The Geographical History of America: Or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, Renee Gladman's *Juice*, Pamela Lu's *Pamela: A Novel*, Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Juliana Spahr's *The Transformation*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's



*Dictée*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, and Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* offer complicated, contextualized, and historical understandings of the formation and practices of cultural identity and offer new ways of imagining feminist futures.

In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, critiquing the idea that "art can and should reflect life accurately and inclusively in every detail," Toril Moi argues that the expectation for that kind of reflectionism in literature fails to account for an understanding of the text, as well as reality, as constructed. As she explains, "extreme reflectionism simply cannot accommodate notions of formal and generic constraints on textual production, since to acknowledge such constraints is equivalent to accepting the inherent impossibility of ever achieving a total reproduction of reality in fiction."<sup>1</sup> Moi additionally cites Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* — still read widely as a foundational text for women's and feminist studies programs — who assert that through the use of various literary devices, the female writers they study simultaneously conform to and subvert patriarchal literary standards.<sup>2</sup> However, the devices are considered an extension of, or supplemental to, content, with less attention paid to formal elements as integral. For Gilbert and Gubar, the narrated characters reflect the real, fragmented, and conflicting experiences of women, and any formal/textual disruptions are smoothed over and organically unified. Although few would now argue with the idea that reality cannot be transparently reproduced in fiction, the historic division between realist content as feminist politics, and the mistaken idea that formally innovative work cannot be political or function as social critique, lingers today.

1 Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), 46.

2 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

For the purposes of grounding this project within current conversations about formally innovative writing by women — avant-garde, language-centered, feminist experimental writing, or non/narrative writing — I refer to *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* that examines “the work of modern and contemporary women writers who contest issues of gender, race, history, and sexuality in innovative poetic forms.”<sup>3</sup> Frost is in part responding to studies of American poetry by women that “tended to focus on a poetics of personal experience, frequently grounded in identity politics” and subsequently “marginalized avant-gardism in feminist poetics” and she examines the work of poets who share a belief that language both shapes, and can take part in changing, consciousness. As she writes, “each [poet] weds radical politics to formal experiments.”<sup>4</sup> Using both the history of avant-garde practice and revising the term in relation to “radical feminist poetries,” Frost defines

avant-gardism as any artistic practice that combines radical new forms with radical politics or utopian vision. [...] I hold that the avant-garde venture unites formal innovation with political engagement: The avant-gardist assumes that a daring new artistic practice has the potential to change the world by inciting a change of consciousness. In my view, radical political belief precedes and *necessitates* formal invention on the part of the avant-garde artist: More than an aesthetic choice, experimentation bears the full weight of urgent social conviction.<sup>5</sup>

At once personal and political, the history of feminist avant-garde practice challenges the conception of a kind of unification in which material that doesn't seem to fit is left out. Acknowledging that disparate elements are fundamental, these texts re-

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3 Elisabeth A. Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003).

4 *Ibid.*, xii.

5 *Ibid.*, xiv–xv.

fuse to make invisible those elements that form real, complex identities in the world.

The content of cultural identity cannot be separated from how that is constructed, organized, articulated, challenged, and presented via form. The hybrid, prose texts studied here respond to the difficulties of narration, reflect and comment on narrative and language structures as social/historical constructions, and offer examples of how as subjects and citizens we are as much formed by language as by other ideological and cultural material. The writers dismantle, manipulate, and re-define narrative strategies, and for this reason I've adopted the term non/narrative from the special issue of *Poetics Journal* 5, 1985, and the 2011 issue of *Journal of Narrative Theory* on Non/Narrative. According to Carla Harryman, "the editors [of *Poetics Journal*] chose to resist creating a simple binary between narrative and non/narrative practices, representing a spectrum of positions by new narrativists, poets, and artists" that "would invite readers to take narrative and nonnarrative equally seriously."<sup>6</sup> The issue of *Poetics Journal* was aimed at writers thinking about narrative in their own work and also meant to "encourage critical study of non/narrative in scholarly contexts that could in turn enable the development of a narratology that took seriously the non."<sup>7</sup> Building upon these early goals in a new historical moment, Harryman explains that work that doesn't conform to single genre categories has the potential to

radically break rules of story-telling to stage a necessary disruption of asymmetrical power relations, the limits of knowledge, psychological and social operations of recognition and misrecognition, the complex connections between private experience and larger social forces, and the cooperative construction of meaning.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Carla Harryman, "Introduction, Non/Narrative," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 2-3.

7 Ibid., 3.

8 Ibid., 2.

The subjects in the work I examine here seem to assert that cultural identity is at times like fragmented narrative form. The texts are not *nonnarrative*, but differently-narrative, existing outside of frameworks of taught expectations. “Breaking the rules” of narrative writing not only disrupts and foregrounds that disruption, but also pushes readers to participate in the experience as a larger social politics and to collaborate in constructing meaning. Non/narrative practice as exploratory interrogation into the nature of identity formation in a historically patriarchal, racist, and homophobic society might then offer greater possibilities for the articulation of identity and experience beyond cohesive, content-focused, ethnographic texts.

Examples of non/narrative writing that utilizes innovative formal strategies to enact content, particularly in terms of identity, experience, and autobiography, can be found in the work of Language poet Lyn Hejinian, particularly in *My Life*, in which fragments, details, and excess exist on the page rather than being neatly and coherently narrated. In part, *My Life* asserts that our lives often feel paratactic, in which one detail/fragment is constantly pushed up against another, rarely in a linear fashion, and that feeling, language, and affect exist spatially versus linearly. Another example is Beverly Dahlen’s serial poem, *A Reading* 1–20, which negotiates subjective understanding through the narrator’s textual “conversations” with Freud and features an engagement with language and the psychoanalytic process. Dahlen offers a model of alternative — non-normative — practice, potentially altering our habits of understanding how subjective expression can be represented.<sup>9</sup> The focus is on the process of coming to know, as a means to explore “other” ways of thinking and seeing the (female, lesbian, bisexual) self in relation to the larger world.

The “New Narrative” writers in the 1970s and ’80s, offer another example. As Robert Glück explains, “our lives and reading

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9 Jill Darling, “Narrative Perversion, Beverly Dahlen’s ‘A Reading,’” *Something on Paper* 3 (2016), <http://www.somethingonpaper.org/issue-3/investigations-darling/>.

lead us toward a hybrid aesthetic, something impure.”<sup>10</sup> Some of the New Narrative writers saw Language Poetry as a model for formal experiment but limited in terms of cultural and identity politics. “We were thinking about autobiography,” Glück writes, “by autobiography we meant daydreams, nightdreams, the act of writing, the relationship to the reader, the meeting of flesh and culture, the self as collaboration, the self as disintegration, the gaps, inconsistencies and distortions, the enjambments of power, family, history and language.”<sup>11</sup> Recognizing the deeply felt need to bring alternative experience into other kinds of narrative forms, Dianne Chisholm further states, “the narrative of New Narrative represents gay lives as constructed on location. It calls historical, gay-consciousness into being. [...] Writing autobiography is New Narrative’s mode of representing the complex constructedness of self in commodity society.”<sup>12</sup> Chisholm considers work that makes “antithetical experience perceptible,” and that brings together “narrative *and* montage, activist *and* negative critique,”<sup>13</sup> asserting that alternatives to traditional narrative writing can be revolutionary in terms of breaking boundaries and creating spaces of possibility for new models of autobiographical writing and social/sexual identification.

Dismantling the narrative perpetuation of ideological messaging also served a larger purpose for telling the stories of real gay lives. According to Rob Halpern, the movement offered “one response to some unresolved impasses between Gay Liberation, the Avant-Garde, and a New Left that seemed at times unresponsive to the exigencies of sexual politics.”<sup>14</sup> Recognizing the power of narrative to construct subjectivity, this hybrid narrative work brought innovative writing and (gay) politics together

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10 Robert Glück, “Long Note on New Narrative,” *Narrativity*, November 6, 2011, [https://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue\\_one/gluck.html](https://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue_one/gluck.html).

11 Ibid.

12 Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 56.

13 Ibid., 60.

14 Rob Halpern, “Realism and Utopia: Sex, Writing, and Activism in New Narrative,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 105.

in new ways. Steve Abbott, a central figure of the group, wrote at the time, “New Narrative is language conscious but arises out of specific social and political concerns of specific communities. [...] It stresses the enabling role of content in determining form rather than stressing form as independent from its social origins and goals.”<sup>15</sup> Used strategically and consciously, as Halpern explains, “narrative has the potential to make perceptible the occlusions and voids in that history where other stories and their corresponding subject positions might then appear for the first time.” In his own reading, Halpern is “suggesting an approach to narrative as a political response to that history of enclosures: narrative as a nonsite, or a placeholder, for something in excess of that one story. [...] New Narrative could then be read in dialectical tension with its apparent opposite, non-narrative, *each persisting in and through the other*.”<sup>16</sup>

Reading narrative and “non-narrative” in and through each other can alter ideological expectations and create opportunities for subjects to speak and write their otherwise marginalized experiences, or, as Halpern further asserts, “New Narrative has the potential both to map and transform our conditions of possibility for organizing the social material—feelings, language, affects—that enables new subjectivities to emerge.”<sup>17</sup> The texts surveyed in *Geographies of Identity* take this sense of possibility for rendering experience further into explorations of gender, race, culture, language, and more, enacted through the use of formal strategies and narrative subversion. Pushing against the boundaries of form, the transformation of these “conditions of possibility” can allow for new models and ways of knowing, for alternative means of identifying and speaking. Differently-narrated texts can make perceptible that which might otherwise be rendered invisible.

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15 Steve Abbott, “Introduction,” *New Narrative Special Issue of Soup* 2, no. 1 (1981), quoted in Halpern, “Realism and Utopia,” 82–83.

16 Halpern, “Realism and Utopia,” 105.

17 *Ibid.*, 106.

As a feminist politics by way of reading practice, my readings here examine representations of identity on the page and highlight Rachel Blau DuPlessis's assertion that there are "various and possibly contradictory strategies of response and invention shared by women in response to gender experiences."<sup>18</sup> These authors enact struggle and resistance through the negotiation of form and content and show how non/narrative work has the potential to "overturn dominant forms of knowing and understanding."<sup>19</sup> Exploring the relationship between aesthetic practice and the construction of identity contextualized by the social, historical, and political, I also incorporate Julia Kristeva's idea of the subject-in-process from *Revolution in Poetic Language*. In her chapter on Kristeva, Toril Moi writes, "[i]nstead of an exclusive emphasis on the gender of the speaker, [Kristeva] recommends an analysis of the many discourses that together construct the individual."<sup>20</sup> Put another way, Kristeva states, "I favour an understanding of femininity that would have as many 'feminines' as there are women."<sup>21</sup> The theory of the subject-in-process — or the relation between (or evolution of) the subject and (evolution of) language — is especially useful for looking at the relationship between the subject of the text and the space of potential politics opened by disruptive textual strategies.<sup>22</sup> According to Moi, the subject-in-process, or the disruption of the subject, for Kristeva, may be analogous to revolutionary disruptions of society. She offers a linguistic theory that demonstrates how symbolic language is used to continually (re)construct subjects in society, and how its disruption opens space for social politics. Kristeva's idea about the interaction between the semi-

18 Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "For the Etruscans," in *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 10.

19 Ibid., 16.

20 Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 169.

21 Julia Kristeva, "A partir de polylogue," interview with Francoise van Rossum-Guyon, *Revue des sciences humaines* 168 (December 1977): 495–501, quoted in Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 169.

22 For more on this idea see Johanne Prud'homme and Lyne Légaré, "The Subject in Process," *Signo: Theoretical Semiotics on the Web*, 2006, <http://www.signosemio.com/kristeva/subject-in-process.asp>.

otic and symbolic, by which symbolic language is disrupted but not abandoned altogether, is not unlike bell hooks's more material, culturally activist notion that the oppressed use the oppressor's language while simultaneously remaking it as their own.<sup>23</sup>

In these non/narrative texts, cultural identity is often recognized as constructed, relational, and in-process. The authors utilize formal strategies that break away from (symbolic) narratives that "naturalize" gendered cultural experience. And the texts function within the symbolic structures (of patriarchy, of language) but simultaneously embody the semiotic space of disruption, rupture, and contradiction. For Kristeva,

[t]he opposition between feminine and masculine does not exist in pre-Oedipality [the semiotic]. [...] Any strengthening of the semiotic, which knows no sexual difference, must therefore lead to a weakening of traditional gender divisions, and not at all to a reinforcement of traditional notions of "femininity." [...] Femininity and the semiotic do, however, have one thing in common: their marginality. As the feminine is defined as marginal under patriarchy, so the semiotic is marginal to language.<sup>24</sup>

Gender is relational, and since women are positioned as marginal in symbolic, patriarchal order, as Moi explains, "Kristeva's emphasis on marginality allows us to view this repression of the feminine in terms of *positionality* rather than of essences. What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies."<sup>25</sup> The dynamics of identity can shift depending on subject position and social or other contextualizing factors and the parallel between the social and the linguistic helps us to see the difficulty of separating these. Language structures

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23 bell hooks, "this is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you": Language, a Place of Struggle," in *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-cultural Texts*, eds. Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995).

24 Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 165–66.

25 Ibid., 166.



can reinforce and/or react to social structures, and subject positions within these are always potentially shifting. Ultimately, Kristeva is interested in language “as a heterogeneous process”; it is a “complex signifying *process* rather than a monolithic *system*.”<sup>26</sup> And the text is

a practice that could be compared to political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society. [...] on the one hand [...] biological urges are socially controlled, directed, and organized, producing an excess with regard to social apparatuses; and, on the other [...] this instinctual operation becomes a practice — a transformation of natural and social resistances, limitations, and stagnations — if and only if it enters into the code of linguistic and social communication.<sup>27</sup>

The text works on the individual while political revolution changes society, but revolution is made of individuals, socially contextualized and subject to — and formed by — language and communication. “Literary practice” Kristeva further states, points toward “the political horizon from which this practice is inseparable”<sup>28</sup> To focus on process is to be open to the dynamic potential for literary practice as, or aiding in, social change.

Susan Stanford Friedman further considers positionality and introduces “the new geographics of identity”<sup>29</sup> as a means of doing more ethically responsible literary criticism that reflects “opposing movements in the world today revolving around the issue of identity” which is “polyvocal and often contradictory.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>27</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 17.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 19.

To move beyond “gynocriticism and gynesis,”<sup>31</sup> following Friedman, we need to consider geographics including the polyvocal and heterogeneous elements that affect the positionality of a subject and understand that these are dynamic and shifting. Friedman looks to “the blending and clashing of overlapping or parallel discourses of feminism, multiculturalism, poststructuralism and postcolonial studies” to offer six “discourses of identity within this new geography of positionality”<sup>32</sup>:

1. multiple oppression includes the differences among and between women from various cultural, class, and other backgrounds; to define women only in terms of gender renders other oppressions invisible;
2. multiple subject positions occur as the intersection of different or competing cultural formations of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.;
3. contradictory subject positions occur when one is simultaneously oppressed in some way and privileged in another;
4. subjectivity is relational; gender is in relation to sexuality and class; identity is understood as a fluid site versus as a static or fixed essence;
5. situationality means that identity resists being fixed but instead shifts from one context to another;
6. ethnic, postcolonial, diasporic hybridity occurs through geographical migration.<sup>33</sup>

In a way, Friedman maps positionality and identity similarly to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s use of “intersectionality” to consider race and gender in relation to structural oppression and civil rights.

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31 Friedman explains, “[f]or gynocriticism, the existence of patriarchy [...] serves as the founding justification for treating women writers of different times and places as part of a common tradition based on gender. For gynesis, the linguistic inscriptions of masculine/feminine — indeed language’s very dependence on gendered binaries — underlie various feminist unraveling of master narratives and discourses.” *Ibid.*, 18.

32 *Ibid.*, 20.

33 *Ibid.*, 20–24.

As Crenshaw explains, “the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately,” and she considers how these “intersect in shaping structural, political, and representation aspects of violence against women of color.”<sup>34</sup> These theories are also especially useful for considering Kristeva’s textual politics alongside Judith Butler’s cultural politics for marginalized subjects in order to form a conception of identity that is layered, relational, geographical, hybrid, polyvocal, and multiply informed.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler dismantles the often unquestioned acceptance of the binary nature of masculine-feminine gender expressions to show that gender is not a stable formation but is instead dynamic.<sup>35</sup> “Gender trouble” signals the potential for more flexible and varied expression through the disruption of the performance of gender. In *Undoing Gender* Butler examines the variety of gendered identifications and advocates for dismantling social and gender norms in order to create spaces of possibility, as a matter of survival, for subjects’ identification and practice.<sup>36</sup> And in *Giving an Account of Oneself* she moves somewhat away from the focus on gender and sexual identification to consider how we account for ourselves and narrate ourselves to others as ethical subjects in the world and in relation to one another.<sup>37</sup> If we have subjective agency, it is because we are in relation to others, and we account for ourselves within that self-other relation. Butler’s ideas help show the uses and limitations of narrative for subjects who may try and yet “fail” to articulate their life stories and experiences. As well, her ideas help us see how narrative necessarily fails. This thereby opens productive gaps wherein the necessary work of understanding

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34 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1244.

35 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

36 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

37 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

the *self* in relation to the *other*, in terms of social politics, can and should happen. The ethical responsibility is in attending to the gaps in order to better understand ourselves in relation to others and to society, instead of making the inconsistencies or disruptions falsely cohere.

In trying to define the parameters of what makes a text feminist — from authorial intent, to political content, to reader interpretation, to textual stylistics — Elizabeth Grosz concludes that “no text can be classified once and for all as wholly feminist or wholly patriarchal: these appellations depend on its context, its place within that context, how it is used, by whom and to what effect. These various contingencies dictate that at best a text is feminist or patriarchal only provisionally, only momentarily, only in some but not in all its possible readings, and in some but not all its possible effects.”<sup>38</sup> *Geographies of Identity* surveys texts that vary in terms of style as well as feminist, cultural, or other politics. The subjects and narrators examine, work through, and make discoveries about gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and language while simultaneously involving readers in their processes and leaving the conclusive space open for cooperative thinking and potential real-world action. As Butler explains, the narrative “I” does not replace or even represent the “I” that remembers that past, but instead the narrative “I” is *added to* the “I” of real experience, thereby making the cohesive narrative of a self difficult, if not impossible.<sup>39</sup> The non/narrative text can show us the fictional nature of self-narration through hybrid formal strategies and the refusal of subjects to identify as unified and coherent. As social subjects, we are contextualized and formed by the symbolic order, language, and the physical space or geography surrounding us, and all of these are constantly in relation and shifting. The relation between these and one’s having a sense of identity or self-understanding is a dynamic and

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38 Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 23–24.

39 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

fluctuating process made more dynamic by disturbances that affect the seeming stability of social systems.

Elizabeth Frost marks the 1970s as a particular moment when politically feminist poetry and concerns with aesthetic practice in women's writing diverge. As work by women writing accessible political poetry became popular, especially in relation to activist politics of the women's movement, in *The Feminist Avant-Garde*, Frost cites Kathleen Fraser and others who called attention to the work of women interested in aesthetic practice as politics, following in the tradition of the avant-garde, and contextualized in their contemporary moment. Fraser's own politics came to include the formation of the journal *HOW(ever)*, the project and politics of which has been fundamental to re-claiming, recognizing, and theorizing feminist aesthetics. The original impetus has been enhanced and revised by subsequent anthologies and studies that, to different degrees, expand the range of representation to include feminist experimentation as well as ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity.<sup>40</sup> Frost's project brings textual practice and cultural politics in twentieth-century

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40 See books such as: Mary Margaret Sloan, ed., *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women* (Jersey City: Talisman House, Publishers, 1998); Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, eds., *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Ann Vickery, *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000); Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap, *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (Albany: Fence Books, 2015); Dorothy J. Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Maria Damon and Ira Livingston, eds., *Poetry and Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Maria Damon, *Postliterary America: From Bagel Shop Jazz to Micropoetries* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011); Harryette Mullen, *The Cracks between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012); Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011); Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

poetry together to more deeply develop discussions on form, content, race, ethnicity, and gender. She begins with historical examinations of Stein and Mina Loy, moves on to explore race and gender through a reading of Sonia Sanchez and the Black Arts Movement, and finally considers poetic tradition and contemporary hybrid practice through the work of Susan Howe and Harryette Mullen.

Although most discussion of women's experimental writing has centered on poetry, *Breaking the Sequence* is one of few texts dealing with experimental fiction writing by women and one in which contributors explore various ways writers "[explode] dominant forms" of fiction writing and "not only assail the social structure, but also produce an alternate fictional space, a space in which the feminine, marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed. Thus, the rupturing of traditional forms becomes a political act, and the feminine narrative resulting from such rupture is allied with the feminist project."<sup>41</sup> Following Friedman and Fuchs's study of fictional narrative and Frost's consideration of poetry and hybrid texts, *Geographies of Identity* explores non/narrative writing by women that shifts between fiction, nonfiction, autobiography, and poetry and, I hope, further adds to conversations about form, content, cultural identity, and politics.

Important to my own methodology are studies including Juliana Spahr's *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*, Lorenzo Thomas's *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, Aldon Nielson's *Integral Music: Languages of African American Innovation*, Harryette Mullen's *The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be*, Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, and Craig S. Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, among others, for their progressive approaches to cultural studies infused literary criticism. These writers treat aesthetic practice by those historically marginalized as integral to the social and historical

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41 Friedman and Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence*, 4.

contexts of the literary landscape. As Moten explains “[t]he history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist,” and he defines blackness as “the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line.”<sup>42</sup> In a footnote he adds that “blackness is always a disruptive surprise.”<sup>43</sup> Using the idea of the “break” in music, Moten investigates “the convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance at the scene of objection.”<sup>44</sup> In a way then, he argues that blackness itself is always already a kind of avant-garde practice. In jazz, the break stops the flow of the rhythm, often while percussion remains; it’s a suspension, a shift in expectation, an indeterminate detour redirecting our attention.

Mullen further speaks to the negotiation of Blackness and innovative practice, explaining that when innovative “minority poets [...] are not likely to be perceived either as typical of a racial/ethnic group or as representative of an aesthetic movement,” the “erasure” thus “deprives the idiosyncratic minority artist of a history, compelling her to struggle even harder to construct a cultural context out of her own radical individuality.”<sup>45</sup> Poetics studies on innovative writing have often discussed primarily white writers, leaving many writers of color out of the critical conversation. If there is an overriding assumption that only white writers are innovative and writers of color only write in an accessibly narrative or poetic voice, Mullen speaks to this false and dominant construction of categories, pointing out that “the perceived gap that allows different parts of my work to be claimed or assimilated, ignored or rejected, by various readers is widened by the fact that not enough readers challenge or move beyond boundaries that continue to separate writing that appears in ‘black’ or ‘minority,’ ‘mainstream,’ and ‘avant-garde’ books and journals.” And, further, that “the assumption remains

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42 Moten, *In the Break*, 1.

43 Ibid., 1m1.

44 Ibid.

45 Mullen, *The Cracks Between*, 10.

[...] that ‘avant-garde’ poetry is not ‘black’ and that ‘black’ poetry, however singular its ‘voice,’ is not ‘formally innovative.’”<sup>46</sup> The challenge of considering cultural content, identity, and formal innovation across genre and racial lines can result in a limiting of the scope of what poetics can do to showcase writers importantly engaged in a range of aesthetic, cultural, and political work. Mullen names this directly and foregrounds the false divisions set up to categorize writers based on race, aesthetics, and more.

At times problematic, and also important to her own work, Mullen attests to the complicated influence of Gertrude Stein. In the essay, “If Lilies are Lily White,” Mullen writes about the variety of interpretations of Stein’s racism in “Melanctha” and ways of reading Stein’s relationship to race in *Tender Buttons*. She offers a multifaceted reading of the relationship between those works and includes other writing that incorporates both critique and praise of Stein’s texts, namely by Aldon Nielson and Richard Wright. Her analysis shows how one might read “Melanctha” as an investigation into the role of language in the social construction of racial categories, expectations, and stereotypes, though, even if Stein is aware of the critique, she is caught in her own internalized racism limiting her ability to transcend it, which results in characters limited by racist social expectations and stereotypes. The story may begin in critical observation of the social construction of race through language but never makes it beyond its own, or the author’s own, racism. Or as Mullen explains,

[t]he best thing I can say about “Melanctha” is that its creation of awkward characters from the clichés and stereotypes of popular culture draws attention to their constructed subjectivity and also implicates any reader who fails to reach beyond the limits of the ordinary conventions by which meaning is constructed, including the set of conventions that attach social and cultural significance to color. Whether

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 11.



deliberately or not, Stein has put narrative expectations for human complexity in conflict with the racist stereotypes that bracket her characters.<sup>47</sup>

The potential, under-developed critique that is restricted by the conscious or subconscious racism in “Melanctha,” as Mullen explains, might be said to open up to the “playfully poetic,” in part, as a kind of critical approach, in *Tender Buttons*. That is to say, one might read *Tender Buttons* as a more complex account of the relation between language and gendered and racial social expectations and stereotypes.<sup>48</sup> One might further reflect that Stein’s private, queer, and Jewish identities may have made her understanding of race more complicated.<sup>49</sup> Although Mullen doesn’t excuse Stein, she reads these texts with consideration of the more nuanced aspects of Stein’s social-historical positioning and interest in exploration of ideas through linguistic play, and shows how pressure put on language in these ways can highlight how beliefs about gender and race are socially constructed.

Craig S. Womack additionally critiques practices of literary interpretation that use a contemporary lens to separate texts from their historical and cultural contexts and contents. Focusing on texts written by Native people, Womack explains that Native literature has a long history predating European contact. And he argues that much of that literature and history still needs to be recovered since so much of it has been ignored or rewritten by non-Native writers, historians, anthropologists, and others. Aspects of postmodernism, for example, that include deconstructing history and de-centering texts result in marginalization of Native perspectives and literary practice. Womack shares the story of Cheryl Savageau, from a personal correspondence between the two, who explains,

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47 Mullen, *The Cracks Between*, 23–24.

48 Ibid., 28.

49 Maria Damon writes in detail about the intersections between Stein’s writing, politics, and Jewish identity in her chapter, “Displaysias,” in *Postliterary America*.

[i]t is just now, when we are starting to tell our stories that suddenly there is no truth. It's a big cop out as far as I'm concerned, a real political move by the mainstream to protect itself from the stories that Native people, African Americans, gay and lesbian folks [...] are telling. If everybody's story is all of a sudden equally true, then there is no guilt, no accountability, no need to change anything, no need for reparations, no arguments for sovereign nation status, and their positions of power are maintained.<sup>50</sup>

Reading Native literature necessarily means paying attention to the voices and historical realities that have otherwise been excluded by means of Eurocentric, state-maintained and perpetuated ideologies. The forces that produce mainstream culture and intellectual activity “in regards to analyzing Indian cultures have been owned, almost exclusively, by non-Indians,” Womack explains, and therefore “radical Native viewpoints, voices of difference rather than commonality, are called for to disrupt the powers of the literary status quo as well as the powers of the state.”<sup>51</sup> In *Red on Red*, Womack turns to examples that, in their re-presentation, act as disruptive voices to white-washed literary expectations and narrativization. For example, in focusing on Creek literary texts and practices he shares an account of Creek history and culture because, as he tells us, “I believe that one approach to Native literatures should be a study of the primary culture that produces them.”<sup>52</sup> That account of history and culture fill the whole first chapter and contextualize analysis in many subsequent chapters, making clear the ways literature, culture, and history weave inseparably. Writing against mainstream expectations for scholarly criticism, he includes personal stories and creative passages, thus acting as both creator and interpreter of literary texts.

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50 Craig S. Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3–4.

51 *Ibid.*, 5.

52 *Ibid.*, 25.

In one chapter, with the help of Pam Innes, Womack translates, line by line, the “Turtle Story” as told to them by Creek elder, Linda Alexander. He includes a written version of the spoken Creek, with the English translation immediately underneath, so the story becomes a poem on the page retaining much of its original musical, storytelling quality. He also includes a version written by John Swanton, an ethnographer known for “his monumental [and encyclopedic] work on the Creeks” in the early twentieth century.<sup>53</sup> While detailing a great amount of cultural information, Swanton’s books are also filled with bias and racist interpretation, and often lost in his narrated accounts are the sounds, movements, and inflections of Creek language and other material smoothed out of the telling. Ultimately, Womack calls on other Native writers and scholars to reclaim the wide array of Native histories, literary texts, and practices and to make new literary and scholarly work that exemplifies the diversity of Native voices, perspectives, and aesthetic practices.

In the introduction to *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*, Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton reflect on the collection of what they call “form-conscious nonfiction” and “draw attention to the connection between, as Lenape scholar Joanne Barker and I-Kiribati scholar Teresia Teaiwa put it, [...] ‘the telling and the material,’ between the content and the form.”<sup>54</sup> In order to tell Native stories while thinking as much about process as product, drawing on Barker and Teaiwa they explain,

this attention to form (the telling) and how it shapes the content (the material) enables a move away from a focus on a static idea of “Native information” and, instead, emphasizes the dynamic process of “Native in formation.” This shift destabilizes the colonial demand for factual information

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>54</sup> Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton, eds., *Shapes of Native Nonfiction: Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers* (Seattle: Washington Press, 2019), 5; Joane Barker and Teresia Teaiwa, “Native InFormation,” in *Reading Native American Women: Critical/Creative Representations*, ed. Inés Hernández-Avila (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005).

about Native life in favor of a framework that insists upon an understanding of indigeneity as a dynamic, creative, and intentional form which shapes the content that is garnered through its exploration.<sup>55</sup>

This process of formation of Native lives and individual experiences in alternative and non/narrative ways of telling might, as Washuta and Warburton explain, “offer, instead, a glimpse into how contemporary Native authors use nonfiction to challenge conventional knowledge about form, structure, and the production of history.” They see the collection “as an illuminating example of how contemporary Native authors use form to offer incisive observation, critique, and commentary on our political, social, and cultural worlds rather than only relegating their contributions to descriptive narratives of Native life.”<sup>56</sup> The essays in their collection push form and content beyond stereotypical expectations for Native writing and offer examples of hybrid works that foreground construction and practice as integral to cultural content.

Considering “the essay” from these other perspectives also potentially points to something larger than individual writers or their works. As Barker and Teaiwa explain, the “process of interaction between the individual, the process of creation, the genealogies of knowledge, and the relationships built through craft is precisely the exquisite work that the authors herein perform. This work creates rather than merely reflects the world.”<sup>57</sup> Exploring alternatives to writing that perpetuates or reflects dominant ideologies and practices, these writers offer readers access to insights and ideas that can generate other ways of knowing and being in the world. Native writing and storytelling may potentially even contribute to reclaiming or creating the world anew; or as Donald Heath Justice writes, “[c]olonialism is as much about the symbolic diminishment of Indigenous peo-

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55 Washuta and Warburton, *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*, 5.

56 Ibid., 14.

57 Barker and Teaiwa, “Native InFormation,” 115.

ples as the displacement of our physical presence. If there are no more people there can be no more stories [...]. Our literatures are just one more vital way that we have countered those forces of erasure and given shape to our own ways of being in the world.” He further reflects:

I’d go so far as to argue that *relationship* is the driving impetus behind the vast majority of texts by Indigenous writers — relationship to the land, to human community, to self, to the other-than-human world, to the ancestors and our descendants, to our histories and our futures, as well as to colonizers and their literal and ideological heirs — and that these literary works offer us insight and sometimes helpful pathways for maintaining, rebuilding, or even simply establishing these meaningful connections.<sup>58</sup>

Washuta and Warburton turn to the lyric essay as a means of writing that resists “audience consumption” of what is perceived as anthropological or ethnographic transcriptions of Native life and culture. They write, “the gaps of the lyric essay can serve as resistance, the writer’s refusal to catalog the details of their own lives for audience consumption. The lyric essay’s associative leaps, from personal experience to researched material and back, show a breadth of experience and understanding that defies the diminishing into nonexistence.”<sup>59</sup> In its resistance to “assimilation,”<sup>60</sup> essay writing that uses form in the deployment of content can offer ways of writing the personal and cultural and of rewriting “dominant cultural narratives that romanticize Native lives and immobilize Native emotional responses.”<sup>61</sup> Writing is also a way of thinking or processing feeling and it can illustrate “the flux of a character, not a frozen image of one.”<sup>62</sup>

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58 Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), xix.

59 Washuta and Warburton, *Shapes of Native Nonfictions*, 9.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 10.

62 Ibid.

Barker and Teaiwa further demonstrate the potential for contemporary agency and future world-making, explaining,

to be in *formation* [...] is to refuse History's accounts/ac-counting of us. It is to produce another place that is not a silence made voice, which is a move too familiar to colonial-anthropological forms of knowledge that we refuse to inhabit, but is rather a place in which we are the clerks, writers, and curators of our records, artifacts, identities and histories.<sup>63</sup>

Throughout the texts surveyed in *Geographies of Identity*, aesthetic or formal innovation is used politically in order, among other things, to call on readers to contemplate the impossibility of relegating identity, or its representation/narrativization, to singular categories. From Stein to Long Soldier, these writers play with language and textuality, break away from normative expectations, and challenge the idea of narrative (identity) as cohesive and singular and they create models of representation that perform some of the many complex ways subjects identify and narrate — or refuse to narrate — those experiences.

Although “permanently troubled by identity categories,” Judith Butler also believes them to be “sites of necessary trouble”<sup>64</sup> that we can use for thinking and discussion of identity more productively. She explains, “[i]n avowing the sign's strategic provisionality (rather than its strategic essentialism) [...] identity can become a site of contest and revision.”<sup>65</sup> In terms of marginalized, or other, communities, Biddy Martin examines the importance of “the possibility of reconceptualizing identity without abandoning it and its strategic deployment altogether”<sup>66</sup> and

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63 Barker and Teaiwa, “Native InFormation,” 116.

64 Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 308.

65 Ibid., 312.

66 Biddy Martin, “Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s],” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 275.

proposes moving away from focusing on particular groups or “identities” to consider, as Martin explains, “practices of self-representation which illuminate the contradictory, multiple construction of subjectivity at the intersections, but also in the interstices of ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality.”<sup>67</sup> In reading *This Bridge Called My Back*, Martin cites Anzaldúa and others for their attempts to attend to the complex intersections of race, gender, and sexuality:

By demonstrating the complex discursive and institutional intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality and their inscription on the bodies and psyches of women, these autobiographical essays, poems, and letters relate psychic and political struggles in ways that make “identity” irreducible to consciousness. The category “women of color,” as it is elaborated in *This Bridge*, stands in a critical relation to assumptions of unity based on identity.<sup>68</sup>

*This Bridge* explores identity through the use of different genres of writing — poems, letters, essays — and the editors seek to show that there is no single way to represent or articulate identity. The contributors use the various genres to “elaborate” identity. But the editors also stop short of looking beyond the surface of genre and into the language and structures of the texts themselves to say more about how aesthetic innovation can be used as a means of challenging ideologically imposed identities on subjects, to show that the text is irreducible to singular, linear representations of a subject’s participation in the world. If narratively autobiographical texts can represent content that is contradictory and multiple, then *Geographies of Identity* expands that idea to consider how the textually and formally contradictory and multiple intersects with the content of cultural identity to dismantle and redefine identity categories. The texts read here enact the tensions of identity formation in the non/

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 282.

narrative writing of personal and social experience. The narrators of the texts are continually in process as they question and theorize how subjects identify in the world.

Martin additionally explains that for the lesbian-identified contributors in *This Bridge*, “lesbianism [...] marks a desire for more complex realities, for relationships filled with struggle and risk as well as pleasure and comfort.”<sup>69</sup> Lesbianism

remains a position from which to speak, to organize, to act politically, but it ceases to be the exclusive and continuous ground of identity or politics. Indeed, it works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around identity, not to dissolve them altogether but to open them to the fluidities and heterogeneities that make their renegotiation possible.<sup>70</sup>

In this sense Martin considers lesbian identity as an active and fluid process that “works to unsettle” the confines of static “identity.” Taking this idea further, I use the term “queer” to consider active processes and practices of undoing, as an activity of critique and of implementing non-normative (textual and social) strategies, and to move or expand from content into form.

Using David Halperin, we can also consider queerness as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence,” and it “demarcates [...] a positionality vis-à-vis the normative [...] it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance.”<sup>71</sup> Although I don’t want to generalize the term so that it is no longer useful, I do want to consider queerness as a practice of critique and alternative means of identification in response to norms of experi-

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 289–90.

<sup>71</sup> David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62.



ence of white heteronormativity. In order not to assume or place unnecessary emphasis on sexual orientation that is not already considered in the content of the texts — and as it seems to make sense within the arguments of this project — I use “queer” as a way of reading non-normative practices and processes of textual construction, as well as how it may apply to the content of the stories of the text-subjects. A queering of the normative, narrative text enacts social critique in the content (narratives of non-heterosexually identified subjects) and in the form (non/narrative and other formally experimental strategies). Queer subjectivity may be enacted through textual innovation; narrative, in many of these texts, is “queered” as a way of enacting alternative practices and identifications.

Avant-garde practice can draw attention to gaps, inconsistencies, estrangements and disruption. Although some have dismissed the historical avant-garde as “failing” in terms of political impact, it’s also important to consider how avant-garde practice can go beyond a simplified notion that disruption is an end in itself, or that “negativity [...] is identical to [...] political agency” as Barrett Watten argues,<sup>72</sup> and who further explains,

[t]he first notion to be cast aside is that the negativity of the avant-garde is always the same refusal — prototypically, that of male artists to participate in normative culture after the traumatic rupture of total war. Avant-garde negativity is quite variously articulated in relation, particularly, to gender and nationality at specific historical moments. There is no “one” avant-garde, defined by the paradigmatic example of the historical avant-garde.<sup>73</sup>

The project of “reconciling radical form with social agency,” he explains, “is the burden of any new consideration of the avant-

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72 Barrett Watten, “The Constructivist Moment: From El Lissitzky to Detroit Techno,” in *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 150.

73 Ibid., 154.

garde,” even taking into account that “avant-gardes are usually small groups of practitioners at a far remove from the mechanisms of social reproduction.”<sup>74</sup> Using the work of El Lissitzky, a Russian Constructivist, Watten frames a conception of the “constructivist moment” and claims that

[i]n his radical work of the 1920s, the no longer traumatic but now open horizon of revolution and the proposal of such objects are united in the construction of form as an exemplary parable of action. As the word *revolution* itself constructs a horizon of possibility out of an experience of extreme disruption, the continuing revolution is an open horizon of pure possibility that leads to a production of new objects that, in turn, interpret its meaning.<sup>75</sup>

The constructivist moment is one in which the negativity, the rupture, results in a *horizon of possibility* and the construction of art objects which come to inform the meaning of their particular cultural moments. Bringing together the constructive relation between radical formal strategy and social agency, Watten uses the example of Detroit Techno and the “reflexive relation between the negativity of Detroit’s social history [...] and the boundary-breaking shock waves of technological innovation.”<sup>76</sup> Going beyond the initial “negative” disruption, the political can be seen in the way creative work constructs possibility by way of the production of art objects that speak to their particular moments and larger social/cultural history.

Stein’s disruptions of language and narrative open the constructive potential for a new gender consciousness. According to Krzysztof Ziarek, Stein

[p]oses the problem of the relation between the two “avant-gardes”: on the one hand, the modernist textual practices and

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74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 165.

76 Ibid., 195–96.

formal innovations and, on the other, the “avant-garde” of feminist writing, with its critique of cultural formations, sexuality, and politics. These two avant-garde moments in Stein’s work illustrate the convergences between avant-garde textual practices and a reconceptualization of experience outside of the parameters of patriarchal discourse.<sup>77</sup>

Ziarek argues that Stein’s work “is never a matter of a formalist aesthetics” because it actually works to remap “the very structure of experience, against the predominant representational and linguistic practices.”<sup>78</sup> Stein, he tells us, “rewrites the relations constitutive of experience on the elemental linguistic level: relations between words and syntactical rules.”<sup>79</sup> But Stein’s genius lies in the ways she enacts cultural critique through subversive linguistic strategies. *Tender Buttons* and *Lifting Belly*, for example, are “about” lesbian domesticity, romance, and desire; from the caressing of nouns in *Tender Buttons* and the public presentation (the text) of the private lesbian domestic space, to the lesbian “sex act” enacted through erotically charged, repetitive language. Stein challenges given conceptions of both language practice and lesbian desire and opens toward a horizon of possibility for sexual, lesbian, and gendered representations and identifications outside of the text.

I begin with Stein as a philosophical, theoretical, and creative foundation for reading the subsequent, contemporary non/narrative texts that follow. The landscapes of queerness, the avant-garde of the everyday, the constructive potential of syntactic and linguistic dismantling of textual and cultural norms and expectations, the theorization of alternatives, and the practice of refusal and reimagining set the stage for this project. Although the later texts may or not be considered explicitly feminist projects

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77 Krzysztof Ziarek, “Gertrude Stein’s Poetics of the Event: Avant-Garde, the Ordinary, and Sexual Difference,” in *The Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 151.

78 Ibid., 152.

79 Ibid., 155.

by their authors, the way they practice formal, textual disruption, “reconceptualize[e] [...] experience outside of the parameters of patriarchal discourse,” as Ziarek explains above, and point toward different kinds of possibilities for the future lend toward feminist readings.

Famously and repeatedly, in *The Geographical History of America*, Stein writes, “I am I because my little dog knows me.” What may be less well known about Stein is that her dog Basket, and later Basket II, played an important part in Stein and Alice Toklas’s life together. Stein went on daily walks with Basket as part of her domestic and social routine, and one famous photo shows Stein, Alice, and Basket (who was not a little dog but a large white poodle) walking down the street of what looks like a small, French village. This image further conveys the importance of daily habit and domestic life to Stein, whose work is infused with the details of everyday life. The blending of form and content and the relation between her personal life and her experimental writing practice, cannot be explicitly separated. Stein destabilizes identity through linguistic play and constructs a hybrid genre text that is not prose, poetry, or autobiography but a combination of these, and that simultaneously functions as a meta-text that theorizes an interrogation of genre (form) and identity (content). I read *The Geographical History* as a queer politics, a non-normative practice of cultural critique that fuses form and content, and as an example of how we might further the impulse to destabilize and reconceive of textual and cultural identity.

In the work read here after Stein, clear distinctions between form and content become impossible; each informs and constitutes the other. The specific works by Renee Gladman, Pamela Lu, Claudia Rankine, Juliana Spahr, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Layli Long Soldier examine, challenge, and offer alternatives to textual and cultural norms and expectations. These writers, to different degrees, use a variety of formal strategies and problematize narrative autobiographical writing to simultaneously focus on language as instrumental to subjectivity and to represent “experience” as cultural content. They

negotiate practices of avant-garde experimentation and writing that explore identity-as-process through examinations of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and history. The subjects of their texts become witnesses to the discrepancies in culturally inscribed norms and call for expanded possibilities for narrative and social representation. And the texts become new models for representing (polyvocal, heterogeneous, layered) subjective identity.

In the stories in Gladman's *Juice*, the narrators find it impossible to tell their own, racially marginalized, stories; in Lu's *Pamela* the narrator is unable to articulate her own history and experience; and postmodern trauma is enacted in Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as the narrator weaves through pop culture and news stories while reflecting on how we as humans relate to one another. Spahr's *The Transformation*, Cha's *Dictée*, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* create space for subjects and readers who don't identify according to colonizer/white-European narrative expectations. These texts draw out the complex relationships between colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed that exceed binary simplification. Spahr creates a pronoun — and gender — “neutral” account of heterosexually non-normative domesticity. Cha's *Dictée* goes beyond the call for dismantling structures and subjects' need for recognition, and through its hybrid, textual materiality, silenced voices and histories come to “bear witness,” in Kelly Oliver's terms.<sup>80</sup> Anzaldúa rearticulates patriarchal, heteronormative cultural traditions and narratives, creating a new kind of text and identity. And Long Soldier uses a personal, memoir-style narrator to critique the effects of history on contemporary Native and us government relations, or the lack thereof.

Contextualized historical understandings of identity formation as processual, or “in formation,” show how the simultaneous, fluctuating, overlapping, and varying degrees of identity categories play out in different contexts and moments. The sub-

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80 See Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

jects in these texts represent already marginalized identities and enact the theorization of social construction(s) of identity in the world. Although Butler advocates subjects' need for "recognition," Oliver argues that subjects may need more than recognition in order to participate in the act of "witnessing" as that through which subjects gain the ability to address and respond, to speak, in relation to events and others. Further, "none of us develops a sense of ourselves as subjects with any sort of identity apart from relations with others," and so witnessing therefore becomes not simply a project of individual identity but an "ethical and political responsibility."<sup>81</sup> For Oliver, to "conceive of subjectivity as a process of witnessing" necessitates the ability to address and respond "in relation to other people, especially through difference" and to "realize an ethical and social responsibility to those others who sustain us."<sup>82</sup> The witness to history and the document that gives voice to the previously silenced act as models of political and social transformation.

The narrators in the texts read here become witnesses to the limited nature of ideological narratives and the limiting effects of language and binary structures. Breaking through narrative expectations that "naturalize" experience, the writers offer alternative means of documenting antithetical experiences and expanding possibilities for recognition, speaking, and witnessing that don't simply result in narrative cohesion and closure. Echoing Audre Lorde's claim that "poetry is not a luxury,"<sup>83</sup> Judith Butler argues that "possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread."<sup>84</sup> The subjects-in-process in these texts move as multiply-situated subjects in the world, and, one might say, with their eyes on horizons of possibility.

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81 Ibid., 10–11.

82 Ibid., 19.

83 Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984).

84 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29.



I.

LANDSCAPE





As a key influence on contemporary writers, Stein's work continues to offer examples of innovative form as political content. Deborah Mix points out the importance of "recognizing Stein's presence and the vocabularies she offers" and how these contribute to the "democratizing work of redefining experimentalism and the avant-garde so that we can recognize their potential to embody a liberatory and decentralized politics."<sup>1</sup> Stein's formal, textual strategies thus open possibilities for what can be represented or altered through language and they engage language as a socializing structure that must be challenged and dismantled. According to Mix, her "texts operate not by avoiding or encoding meaning [...] but by opening up meaning's possibilities."<sup>2</sup> Stein's politics operate simultaneously at the levels of form and content and critique linguistic and cultural structures that limit possibilities for identification. Further, political engagement occurs on multiple levels: between the writer and the language of the text, between the text and the reader, and between the reader and the world. Mix cites Patrocínio Schweickart who states, "[l]iterature acts on the world by acting on its readers."<sup>3</sup> Because

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1 Deborah M. Mix, *A Vocabulary of Thinking: Gertrude Stein and Contemporary North American Women's Innovative Writing* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 5.

2 Ibid., 15.

3 Patrocínio Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading (1986)," in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick:

there is always more work to do, many writers continue to look to Stein's textual politics and the ways she breaks down and re-writes linguistic and narrative expectations and engages with language as a tool for changing the world.<sup>4</sup>

My reading of *The Geographical History of America* sets up the following chapters and shows a political interrogation of identity by way of the experimental feminist text. Throughout *The Geographical History*, Stein explores relationships between consciousness, writing, identity, geography, language, and social norms and questions the difference between human nature (what might be some kind of "essential" identity) and human mind (which is responsible for thinking and writing) in order to deconstruct readers' understanding of what any of these terms "mean." The process of linguistic interrogation serves to distance the reader from any assumed understanding of identity and instead makes us think more critically about what it means to identify. Ultimately, I see the work as a kind of cultural commentary focused on writing, thinking, and dismantling social organizations of language and sexuality. The formal practices of the text become strategies for enacting cultural critique in the world, and offering alternatives — such as languages, narratives, and content — to dominant modes of discourse and socialization.

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Rutgers University Press, 1997), quoted in Mix, *A Vocabulary of Thinking*, 21.

4 For more on Stein's aesthetic politics and how it differs from other modernists' insistence on the separation of high and low culture, see Ellen E. Berry, *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering: Gertrude Stein's Postmodernism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

“I am I because my little dog  
knows me,” or, the Landscape  
of Identity in Gertrude Stein’s  
*Geographical History of America*

When suddenly you know that the geographical history of America has something to do with everything it may be like loving any man or any woman or even a little or a big dog. Yes it may, that is to say it does.

— Gertrude Stein<sup>1</sup>

*The Geographical History*, she told the reporter, was written “somewhat more clearly” than some of her previous writings. Asked about the difficulties of her style, Gertrude maintained: “I cannot afford to be clear because if I was I would risk destroying my own thought. Most people destroy their thought before they create it. That is why I often repeat a word again and again — because I am fighting to hold the thought.

— James R. Mellow<sup>2</sup>

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1 Gertrude Stein, “The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind,” in *Writings, 1932–1946* (New York: Library of America: Penguin Putnam, 1998), 391.

2 James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (New York: Avon Books, 1974), 503.

Written in the summer after her famous American tour over the fall, winter, and early spring of 1934–35, *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* and the related work, *What Are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them*, come out of Stein's experiences of the tour and the lectures she gave during the tour.<sup>3</sup> Before the American tour, Stein was well known but not widely read, having had trouble publishing her work. However, when *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was published in 1934, it became instantly popular in the United States. In 1934 Stein and Toklas had been living together in Paris for nearly thirty years, and, although Stein had become a popular figure of attention in the media, she was still not taken seriously as a writer. *The Autobiography* was well received for its accessibility (it wasn't as difficult as much of her previous work), as well as its content (it reads like a who's who of the art scene in Paris in the 1920s). About the time *The Autobiography* was released, Stein's

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- 3 See Gertrude Stein, "Entity: Really Writing," in *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), 115–23, and Gertrude Stein, "Identity: Audience Writing (1933–1946)," in *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Haas, 111–14. According to Haas, Stein's post-American tour writing can roughly be divided into entity and identity writing. Identity writing is writing for an audience in work such as in Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1993); and Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), among others. Entity writing is considered by Stein to be "real" writing, which was often more like philosophical reflections like *The Geographical History*. Gertrude Stein's *What Are Masterpieces*, written around the same time as *The Geographical History*, takes up *History's* ideas and themes and presents them in a shorter, more concise and clear manner. Ulla E. Dydo argues, however, that there was no real separation between audience and real writing over the course of the work: "Her texts do not progress linearly from one concern, say, with grammar, or with the novel, to another, nor do they go as I had earlier thought, from 'real writing' to public or audience writing. They never move away from real writing, and Stein's real voice was never lost." See Ulla E. Dydo with William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 5.

opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* premiered on Broadway and was also a popular success. With the combination of these and the encouragement of friends and advisors, Stein agreed to do the American Tour. The tour consisted of a series of lectures, which she wrote to give in cities all over the United States, as well as another series on "Narration," which she gave over a number of meetings at the University of Chicago.<sup>4</sup>

It seems appropriate that Stein's success came with the *Autobiography*, even though the romantic/domestic relationship between Stein and Toklas was never openly discussed. According to scholars, Toklas was instrumental to Stein's work on all levels, and their shared domestic life infused Stein's work. Her "relationship with Toklas was the occasion for linguistic experimentation, exploration, and the expression of childlike joy," as Shari Benstock points out. "For Stein and Toklas, the assumption of an artistic priority is particularly important in understanding the personal dimensions of their Paris life."<sup>5</sup> Also key to Stein's work was her love for modern art and conversations with other contemporary artists and writers of the time. Her fascination with American English became even more prominent while she lived in France. English, for Stein, was a means to deconstruct the power of language and to write "American-ness." For Stein, Benstock explains, "everything in her adult life became a subject for and was subjected to her art. So when she speaks of her own experience living in Europe, or the need to distance herself from America in order to write about it, she is also suggesting the need to distance the facts of her personal life in such a way that she can reapproach them through her writing."<sup>6</sup> This negotiation of attention to the materiality of language and the infusion of personal experience are central to her body of work and its reception over her lifetime.

4 For more on the American tour, see Mellow, *Charmed Circle*.

5 Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 176.

6 *Ibid.*, 14.

According to its title, *The Geographical History of America* is analogous to “the relation of human nature to the human mind.” The relation between these however, is that they are not related, or their relation cannot be coherently articulated. Human nature, we are told throughout the text, “is not interesting.” The human mind, on the other hand, corresponds to, has to do with, or may actually be, writing. We might interpret that the human mind is represented by writing, or that writing is proof of the human mind that thinks, writes, constructs. Writing and identity, read through Stein, are similar in that each is constructed, and discontinuous. Writing that has no beginning, middle, and end and subverts cohesive narrative structure serves as an analogy for alternative practices or identities that disrupt and call attention to social/structural norms as constructed, and constricting. *The Geographical History* is uneven, disparate, and non/narrative, as is the relationship between human nature and human mind. It may not be articulated coherently, though it nonetheless, according to Stein, deserves thinking, writing, and reflection as a process of discovery and learning.

Stein, as in much of her work, is concerned in *The Geographical History* with simultaneity, or enacting a continuous present on the page, and doing away with writing that has, as she repeats throughout, a beginning, middle, and end.<sup>7</sup> It is written using mainly present tense verbs and gerunds, and only occasionally, and therefore noticeably, is the writing in the past tense. At times phrases or fragmented ideas are used in place of sentences with subjects and predicates, and sometimes longer sentences get caught up in the sound of their words and repeat and circle around as if stalling their movement forward. Stein seems to be showing us that if a complete sentence has a beginning, middle, and end, then sentences that do not have subjects

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7 Although this may not be exactly the same kind of continuous present as in work like *Tender Buttons* and *Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress*, it is another kind of example of continuous present, grounded in present tense in the grammar of the language throughout, as well as on the level of the text as a whole.

and predicates, or that end up in a circle of repeated words, keep from progressing in a linear way. Each word represents each new present moment; there is no past and no future but only "presence."

The line famously repeated in various ways throughout the text, "I am I because my little dog knows me," is an example of the simultaneity of formal textual strategies used by Stein, such as repetition, word play, and challenging the limits of the signifier and signified relationship, as well as the content of her cultural/philosophical investigation into the nature of identity formation and negotiation in the world. The first-person narrator in *The Geographical History* challenges reader expectations by subverting how we understand the voice of the "I" of the text. The words "identity" "masterpiece" and "autobiography," as well as other terms having to do with writing and language, nature, and romance, are repeated throughout the text. Their repetition, with slight changes in usage, disorients us as readers, making us reconsider how these terms "mean" and how we are to understand their use for Stein. Additionally, the text critiques the progression of narrative by using chapter titles that do not seem to progress forward. For example, chapter and section titles often seem random: "Chapter II" is followed by "Chapter III" which is followed by "Chapter II," and these are repeated as titles throughout along with variously numbered "Acts" and "Parts." Recognizing that language creates meaning, Stein reclaims ordinary terms that we otherwise take for granted and pushes them so that they become less recognizable, entangling the connections between human nature and the linguistic and social construction of meaning.

Identity, human mind, and human nature are in flux in this text, avoiding definition, and as concepts they become decisively unclear. Like human nature, identity as a term is always in danger of being essentialized. If human nature "just is" then identity can be considered intrinsic, that we are born with our static identities. The human mind is about writing and thinking, and the blending of mind and nature together, in often incoherent ways, seems to be part of Stein's purpose. The line between



nature and the social construction of our identities, for example, is a constantly shifting one, or at best blurry, so that we can never be sure what we are born with and how we are made by the world into which we are born. It is this tension and lack of clarity that plays out through the circular “arguments,” repetition, rhetorical play, and logical fallacies she uses to draw readers into the conversation, while refusing to draw conclusions or spell out definitive explanations. The narrator’s refusal to define or explain identity draws our attention to the fact that even though we use the term as if we know what it means, we really have no idea. And the repetition of “I am I because my little dog knows me” breaks the concept of identity out of the abstract box of assumed understanding. Putting identity in fluctuating relation to both human nature and human mind also puts pressure on any simple definitions: concepts become simultaneous, instead of one causing another, and we, as readers, find ourselves engaging with concepts on multiple levels and in multiple directions all at once. And each turn of each term shifts the process just enough to continue to destabilize meaning, keeping us reading for more, so that the writing is the thinking.

We can also consider this kind of writing as a queer practice. As Stein destabilizes the meaning of the identity-related terms, Butler’s explanation of repetition and the destabilization of gendered identity and the lesbian subject seems especially relevant:

Through the repeated play of this sexuality that the “I” is [...] it is precisely the repetition of that play that establishes [...] the instability of the very category that it constitutes. For if the “I” is a site of repetition, that is, if the “I” only achieves the semblance of identity through a certain repetition of itself, then the “I” is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it. In other words, does or can the “I” ever repeat itself, cite itself, faithfully, or is there always a displacement

from its former moment that established the permanently non-self-identical status of that "I" or its "being lesbian"?<sup>8</sup>

According to Butler, if gender, like identity, is a performance, then we perform our identities through repetition of our "selves"; the "I" has to repeat itself in order to achieve that "semblance of identity."<sup>9</sup> The potential for "trouble" comes by way of the impossibility of exact repetition. The "I" can't repeat or "cite itself" in the same way all the time so that there is a "non-self-identical status" more accurately representative of an "I" than a singular or stable performance or definition of identity. Identity is not seamless, in Butler's terms, but always shifting, and recognizing this processual movement of identity calls out the fictional nature of sexual and other identity markers as given and stable. Butler continues,

[i]f repetition is the way in which power works to construct the illusion of a seamless heterosexual identity, if heterosexuality is compelled to *repeat itself* in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity, then this is an identity permanently at risk, for what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose? [...] That there is a need for a repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical. It requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming *de*-instituted at every interval.<sup>10</sup>

Sexuality, or identity, is not seamless even though the normative "heterosexual" is constructed as such and believed to be coherently uniform and unproblematic both in form and content. Heterosexuality as the accepted norm is seen as stable and without disruption. However, heterosexuality, as identity, is pre-

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8 Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 311.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 315.

cisely not stable, nor is any singularly defined identity marker. The emphasis on repetition is its own undoing; where repetition fails to re-establish the system of gender/identity conformity, gaps are found in the logic and social interpellation fails.<sup>11</sup> In its excess, Stein's repetition destabilizes the power repetition as a tool of social construction. When repetition of sexual and gender performance fails or repeats inexactly or is used for a different purpose than ideological inscription, this lends toward the undoing or deinstitutionalization of language and identity.

Performing or enacting queerness entails interrogating and breaking away from perceived norms and boundaries. Stein insists on constantly pushing, even redefining the idea of the boundary itself. Earlier readings of Stein's discussions of the relation between human nature and human mind often simplify a dualistic separation between the two.<sup>12</sup> The distinction, however, is unclearly delineated; their relation a continual process that is dynamic and in flux. As a strategy, this works against the reliance on simple definitions and binary constructions. If we cannot clearly articulate the relation between human nature and human mind, then we cannot define and categorize subjects based on who or what we think they are, and our processes of knowing ourselves and others become "queered," opening alternative spaces for interrogative learning and understanding.

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11 I'm using Althusser's theory of interpellation in which subjects are ideologically produced as social beings from Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

12 Kirk Curnutt points to the "distinction between the inner and outer self," where identity is that outer self that is tolerated and not related to the inner self that "exists independent of observation"; see Kirk Curnutt, "Inside and Outside: Gertrude Stein on Identity, Celebrity, and Authenticity," *Journal of Modern Literature* 23, no. 2 (1999): 291. Also see Jennifer Ashton, "'Rose Is a Rose': Gertrude Stein and the Critique of Indeterminacy," *Modernism/Modernity* 9, no. 4 (November 2002): 581–604, who uses the more clearly and simply delineated concepts of identity and entity from *What Are Masterpieces* to put human nature and human mind on separate "sides," though, in the *Geographical History*, the two are in more complicated relation.

Early on in *The Geographical History*, the discussion of human nature and human mind, in relation to the question of identity, is presented as complex subject matter, and thus the process of interrogation and discovery and begins:

### Chapter III

The question of identity has nothing to do with the human mind it has something although really nothing altogether to do with human nature. Any dog has identity.

The old woman said I am I because my little dog knows me, but the dog knew that he was he because he knew that he was he as well as knowing that he knew she.<sup>13</sup>

Immediately, "identity" is disconnected from anything we think we might know about it. Stein puts identity in uneasy relation to mind and nature. If any dog can have identity, then identity cannot be an essential aspect of human nature, but it does point to our having identities as social beings. The question of identity is one of relation, of one to another: the old woman in relation to her dog who "knows" her sets up an examination of the terminology itself that will always fall short of definition. Stein creates an "unsatisfying" excess of language that will continually fail to account for itself, while we as readers will only fall short in understanding whether or not there is even any such thing as identity, let alone how we might define it. As Butler explains, making sense of identity in terms of self-understanding will generally fail. The gap between naming and identity, and being "an identity," limits one's ability to narratively account for oneself:

If the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us and marks immediately an excess and opacity that falls outside the categories of identity, then any effort "to give an account of oneself" will have to fail in order to approach being true. As we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally

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13 Stein, "The Geographical History of America," 423.

or definitively, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it.<sup>14</sup>

This work is excessive in its refusal to identify, Stein's narrator highlighting the inability or failure to account for the relation between nature, mind, and identity. There is no answer that satisfies the questions presented, but instead the process of exploration, over the course of the text, allows the questions to linger, to remain open as the meaning/content that offers insight into the nature of identity formation in the world. Writing that highlights its own failure to cohere — especially in regard to social norms of language, sexuality, and representation — pushes the limits of what is acceptable and disrupts or “troubles” the system, thus opening new spaces of possibility. This further supports the importance of relationality in understanding ourselves and for “letting the question remain open” in order to “let the other live.”<sup>15</sup>

In an early section, titled “The question of identity,” Stein begins to play with “I” as the first-person pronoun, which represents identity, and the number one, written variously as “one” and “I.” She uses repetition of the “I” as a defamiliarizing strategy and separates herself and her reader from really knowing what the pronoun represents. For example, we can see the signs “I,” as both pronoun and Roman numeral, and “one” in the following passages:

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14 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 42–43.

15 *Ibid.*, 43.

Part IV

The question of identity

A Play

I am I because my little dog knows me.  
Which is he.  
No which is he.  
Say it with tears, no which is he.  
I am I why.  
So there.  
I am I where.

Act I Scene III

I am I because my little dog knows me.

Act I Scene I

Now that is the way I had played that play.  
But not at all not as one is one. [...]

Scene I

I am I yes sir I am I.  
I am I yes Madame am I I.  
When I am I am I I.  
And any little dog is not the same thing as I am I.  
Chorus. Or is it.  
With tears in my eyes oh is it.  
And there we have the whole thing.  
Am I I.  
And if I am I because my little dog knows me am I I.  
Yes sir am I I.  
Yes madame or am I I.

The dog answers without asking because the dog is the answer to anything that is that dog. But not I. Without tears not I.<sup>16</sup>

The constant repetition of “I” and its interchangeability with the number one makes the reader question the viability of an “I” that knows itself or one that understands the relation between the first-person pronoun and third-person pronouns. In order to be an “I” and give an account of oneself, according to Butler, one has to be in relation to another. There is no “I” without an other, or a “you.” The repetition of “I am I because my little dog knows me” seems to be a strategy of convincing, as if Stein’s narrator is trying to convince herself that she has identity because she is recognized (by her dog, by others), but that the need for convincing is always a need and never a fulfillment while questions still linger (“I am I why. I am I where”). There are also questions of interchangeability: “Which one is there I am I or another one” and so if one has identity (“I”) how or why is that different from another’s “I”/identity, and displacement: “But we in America are not displaced by a dog oh no no not at all not at all at all displaced by a dog.”<sup>17</sup> If identity is interchangeable, and dogs and people all can have identity, then this also reduces the importance of the concept altogether, potentially creating a kind of nonidentity. If every “one” has “identity” and individual identities can be displaced, then what is the point of identity at all as a concept? It is this relation between identity and nonidentity which Stein’s narrator continues to explore.

According to Kaja Silverman, linguist Emile Benveniste argues that “language, discourse, subjectivity” are “shown to be theoretically inseparable”:

There is no concept “I” that incorporates all the *I*s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers, in the sense that there is a concept “tree” to which all the individual

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16 Stein, “The Geographical History of America,” 401, 405.

17 Ibid., 401.

uses of *tree* refer. [...] Then, what does *I* refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: *I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. [...] The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse. [...] And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language.<sup>18</sup>

As Silverman points out, "Benveniste insists that the individual finds his or her cultural identity only within discourse, by means of the pronouns 'I' and 'you.'"<sup>19</sup> It is through language, by way of our pronominal relations to each other, that we are able to "find" our personal/cultural identities. According to Benveniste and Silverman, subjectivity is always already conditioned by the available discourses and understanding of one's place in the (linguistically constructed) world. If the "basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language," then subjects' abilities to form ideas and negotiate their own processes of identity necessarily work through language and discourse. Or as Silverman further asserts,

[t]he subject's discourse is constrained by the rules of language; it can only speak by means of a pre-existing linguistic system. Moreover, "language" must here be understood in the broadest possible sense [...] every utterance must be conceived as having various levels of signification, and issuing from multiple voices. It is spoken not only by the palpable voice of a concrete speaker, writer, or cluster of mechanical apparatuses, but the anonymous voices of cultural codes which invade it in the form of connotation.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), quoted in Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 43–44.

19 Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, 45.

20 *Ibid.*, 50.



These pre-existing rules and “cultural codes” constrain and contextualize discourse, contributing potentially to constraints on subjectivity.<sup>21</sup> Or, one might say, a speaking and writing subject is contextualized within a cultural and linguistic system that “pre-exists the individual, and which determines his or her cultural identity.”<sup>22</sup> If subjectivity is formed through or because of language, then understanding and performing our identities might also be considered as both constructed and open to alteration. Through language we may be subject to ideological expectations and normalizing narratives, but in using language we might also subvert and “re-write” those.

Stein takes on the cultural and linguistic systems within which she is situated and writes through them, making an argument about the social construction of “human nature” and the false idea that “identity” is a natural part of that. She takes the material language of particular concepts (e.g., identity, autobiography, romance, etc.) and works to divorce them from their cultural significance created through discursive repetition and acceptance. The other-oriented use of repetition and refusal to define or explain brings the process of signification back into the realm of the arbitrary. If Saussure claimed that the relationship between signifier and signified is an arbitrary one, use and repetition have changed the status of this relationship to one that is more determinative. Stein challenges the signifier-signified relationship and shows that identity and subjectivity are not essential and given, but these are as constructed as anything else that is not part of the literal, natural landscape. To understand “identity,” one has to understand the cultural and linguistic systems that have constructed the concept itself. And if “identity” is a construction that has no essential core, then the idea of “autobiography,” as an account of an identity, is doubly fictional. The text then becomes a material example of an attempt to dismantle the linguistic and narrative systems that claim to offer us the tools for self-understanding. Stein uses the materials of lan-

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 52.

guage to show readers the impossibility of complete subjective awareness within these systems. She also uses particular tropes or examples to draw connections and open new spaces for re-thinking the socially inscribed.

Early in the text, Stein draws on the genre of the detective story as a way to investigate the mystery and documentation of identity:

The whole book now is going to be a detective story of how to write.

A play of the relation of human nature to the human mind.

And a poem of how to begin again

And a description of how the earth look as as you look at it which is perhaps a play if it can be done in a day and is perhaps a detective story if it can be found out.<sup>23</sup>

And:

How I do like numbers this Detective story number one.

Detective story number I. About how there is a human mind.

And how to detect it.

Detective story number I.

The great thing to detect in a detective story is whether you have written as you have heard it said. If you do write as you have heard it said then you have to change it.<sup>24</sup>

"Detective story number I" might be the first in a series of stories, or it may be a story about "how to detect" identity or an "I." An autobiography might be a detective story in the way it compiles the details of a life and then tries to make sense of them in narrative form. Stein's project undoes narrative expectations and explores concepts we think we understand, puts them under pressure, and foregrounds fragments instead of in-

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23 Stein, "The Geographical History of America," 409.

24 Ibid., 411.

stitutionally inscribed coherence. Writing and human mind are intimately related, writing and thinking, inseparable. This work is an autobiographical detective story about self and writing, or the writing self. And this writing, like identity, is always in process, negotiating what is heard and said and written, and always subject to change.

Focusing on the present tense of writing, Stein claims to disavow history, possibly because history is not of the present and can only be written in retrospect. The narrator tells us, “[n]ow history has really no relation to the human mind at all, because history is the state of confusion between anybody doing anything and anything happening.”<sup>25</sup> And it’s not about remembering and forgetting:

The land has something to do with the human mind but nothing to do with human nature.

Human nature is animal nature but the human mind the human mind is not.

If it were then the writing that has been written would not be writing that any human mind can read, it has really no memory nor any forgetting.

Think of the Bible and Homer think of Shakespeare and think of me.

There is no remembering and there is no forgetting because memory has to do with human nature and not with the human mind.<sup>26</sup>

Remembering is about the past, while writing, or the human mind, has to do with the present constantly turning into a new present. In the middle of *The Geographical History*, a section on autobiography further illustrates disinterest in the past, or memory, as an aspect of “uninteresting” human nature. Writing autobiography in the continuous present is an activity of the mind. In contrast, the pain of human nature may be less in one’s

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 407–8.

control since "human nature is not only uninteresting it is painful but I it is not I who doubt what it is all about but naturally what it is is what it is not."<sup>27</sup> An "I" (person) is a "one" (individual) who is not an "I" until known by another. Further, in two later consecutive sections: "[a]utobiography number one is almost done. Autobiography number one" and "[a]utobiography number one now almost completely begun" show the constant starting again, this life that is continually in process. Time, like narrative progression, tries to contain that which doesn't otherwise abide by such constraints.

### Autobiography I

When I was one that is no longer one of one but just one that is to say when I was a little one, but not so little that I meant myself when I said not one.<sup>28</sup>

Story, like identity, is almost always beginning or constantly beginning again, and cannot be forced to narratively progress.

The story of my life.

### Chapter one.

At that time I had no dogs

### Chapter II

So I was not I because my little dog did not love me. But I had a family. They can be a nuisance in identity but there is no doubt no shadow of doubt that that identity the family identity we can do without.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 458.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 448.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 458.

The “family identity” is yet another way of identifying through a social institution. Like language and other social structures, “family” might reinforce norms of identification and behavior; and family isn’t chosen, which is to say one’s family is outside of one’s control (unlike dogs, with whom we do choose relationships). Social, cultural, and familial recognition may become difficult if a subject seeks alternative possibilities of identification outside of social norms and categories. The significance of being recognized by one’s dog, for Stein, is an example of the complexity of identity and recognition and may expand the sense of the possible: if identity, which begins within the family structure, is impossible, being recognized in alternative ways becomes necessary.

Still, the problem of socially constructed identity lingers, and Stein’s repetition of the phrase “I am I because my little dog knows me” demonstrates the continuous negotiation of an unanswerable question. While this repeated phrase may be read as displacing human identity by putting that in relation to dog identity, it can also be read as calling for an alternative means of recognition and conscious choice (human mind) versus succumbing to some kind of fate of human nature. In her personal life, Stein’s dogs were important to her as companions, and using the example of the relationship between dog and owner further sheds light on that between self and other (one identity in relation to another). Repetition of “I am I because my little dog knows me” disorients us as readers even while we may recognize the relationship between one and one’s dog as familiar and ordinary, leading us to consider “identity” from an unexpected perspective.

Further in the text, and more specifically in terms of geography, we read, “[i]n a small country where the land is not flat and where as you look you see what it is if it is as it is a great deal of poetry can and will and shall and must and may be written.”<sup>30</sup> As writing comes out of, or is in relation to, the cultural realm, location plays a key role. The text and its context are in dynamic

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 467.

process. As an American living in France, Stein negotiated these geographical and emotional spaces in much of her work. Poetry, for example, as writing that interrogates language, emotion, and culture, can be read as analogous to geographical texture. "But in a flat country it must have content but not form and that may make a master-piece but is it poetry,"<sup>31</sup> Stein writes. Poetry, like language, like identity, is not flat. And the relation between form and content is like that between a subject and her geographical and cultural context, geography being used here both figuratively and literally. Stein wrote "about" America, using everyday American English, from her physical context of France. Of her time in America during the tour of 1934, she said, "the being here it is so natural that it is not real,"<sup>32</sup> which points to the distance, both geographic and linguistic, that seems necessary for trying to make sense of the natural landscape, identity, and her own sense of "Americanness" as an ex-pat in France writing in ordinary American English.

Stein's continuous present functions non/narratively and against writing that "naturalizes" who and what we are. We use language to create understandings of human nature, so for Stein, the deconstruction of these narratives has to be approached through linguistic practice. Considering Butler and Benveniste, where subjectivity is possible because of discourse, the subject of the text (the "I" of experience + the narrative "I") is contextualized for Stein through language and geography. Landscape and scenery are continuous, similarly to the continuous present:

Ordinarily anybody finishes anything.

But not in writing. In writing not any one finishes anything. That is what makes a master-piece what it is that there is no finishing.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Gertrude Stein, *How Writing Is Written*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), quoted in Joan Retallack, "Introduction," in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 15.

Please act as if there were the finishing of anything but any one any one writing knows that there is no finishing finishing in writing.<sup>33</sup>

Enacting the “not-finishing” in which there is no forced narrative made of beginning, middle, end, and closure, she compares a play to natural landscape or scenery, both of which continue uninterrupted and without expectations for content and structure.

A little play.

War and storms.

Romanticism and money and space.

Human nature and identity and time and place.

Human mind.

Master-pieces.

There need be no personages in a play because if there are then you do not forget their names and if you do not forget their names you put their names down each time that they are to say something.

The result of which is a play that finishes.<sup>34</sup>

A play, or to play, is active. If identity, like narrative, is expected to be a static and cohesive product created by a process which is then forgotten and naming leads to recognizability in terms of given cultural codes and discourses, Stein is more interested in writing or identity as undetermined play that is open, dynamic, and in flux. As Jennifer Ashton points out, “naming,” for Stein, “has been understood as the sign whose structure of meaning is the very paradigm of determinacy,” and so *not naming* keeps the play open, not determined, not finishing.<sup>35</sup> Or,

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33 Stein, “The Geographical History of America,” 480.

34 Ibid., 482.

35 Ashton, ““Rose Is a Rose,”” 582.

What is a play.  
A play is scenery.<sup>36</sup>

A play, like natural scenery, is continuous action in the present. A play enacts story, while a novel might tell a story of something that already happened. Without naming, and without linear progression, a play might continue, like scenery, indefinitely.

Coming to the end of *The Geographical History*, we read, again, "I am I because my little dog knows me" and, following that, "the figure wanders on alone."<sup>37</sup> But one can only be a one, an "I" in relation, and as differentiated from an other (e.g., my little dog). The figure is alone, but the "I" is relative: the sign in the sentence, the speaker in discourse. Stein continues, "I so easily see that identity has nothing to do with masterpieces although occasionally and very inevitably it does always more or less come in."<sup>38</sup> Through exploring these questions in *The Geographical History*, Stein take us on a journey that ruptures our understanding of what it means to identify. As subjects, we are in flux and in process, rarely, if ever, coherent and unified. And in recognizing this we can work further to dismantle socially constructed limitations and push the boundaries of language, identity, and textual possibility.

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36 Stein, "The Geographical History of America," 485.

37 Ibid., 487.

38 Ibid.





II.

CRISIS



Renee Gladman's *Juice*, Pamela Lu's *Pamela: A Novel*, and Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* are works of cultural critique in creative form that examine, challenge, and offer alternatives to textual and cultural norms and expectations. These writers problematize narrative autobiographical writing and show how language is instrumental to subjectivity and they explore identity-as-process through examinations of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and history. The subjects of their texts become witnesses to the discrepancies in culturally inscribed norms and they enact new models for representing polyvocal and heterogeneous identity.

Through fiction, memoir, and hybrid forms, the authors of these texts combine historical and contemporary cultural experiences of Black and Asian American women with innovative aesthetic practices to dismantle totalizing narratives of identity. They critique imposed narratives of identity and employ non/narrative strategies to show how identity is about process, not product. And they explore themes, such as the erasure of memory, the genealogy of the "self," and traumatic, postmodern subjectivity, particularly as they are relevant in contemporary American culture. Narrators in these works struggle through memory, history, and language in order to understand what their experiences have been in order to give account of them on their own terms.

Through hybrid writing practices, Gladman, Lu, and Rankine enact the concept that oppositional poetics, languages, cul-

tures, and histories disrupt and create gaps in totalizing narratives, drawing attention to narrative's ideological function and the ways national identity are inscribed. Their texts become metaphorical and literal illustrations of plurality, give voice to historically silenced and marginalized subjects, and become examples of representation that exceed normative narratives of identity and citizenship.

National identity is constructed through narratives of what Homi K. Bhabha terms "national will." Instead of "nationalism," Bhabha explores what he calls "the *locality* of culture"; he advocates for ways of "writing the nation" other than through dominant, historicist national narratives that erase the inconsistencies and heterogeneity of experience or make them seem to cohere; and he advocates "a form of living" that is, among other things, "more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring."<sup>1</sup> This kind of cultural, locational thinking challenges narrative historicity that constructs subjects in terms of patriotism, citizenship, and national will. Gladman, Lu, and Rankine seem to pick up on Bhabha's call for "another time of *writing* that will be able to inscribe the ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic 'modern' experience of the western nation"<sup>2</sup> and their texts advocate for new forms and possibilities in the representation(s) of modern, culturally and racially diverse experiences.

Dominant, historical narratives function ideologically to control the understanding of nation and citizen in the present and to continually displace the "irredeemably plural modern space" of the contemporary nation. However, "counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual," Bhabha counters,

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1 Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 291–92.

2 *Ibid.*, 293.

“disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined’ communities are given essentialist identities.”<sup>3</sup> These counter-narratives may function both at the level of ideological socialization and in the aesthetic realm, particularly in work that enacts the ambivalence and inconsistency of modern experience. Deconstructing ideological narratives of the nation and opening possibilities for representing dissident and alternative voices is a necessary oppositional strategy and requires continuous work. Bhabha draws on Walter Benjamin, who, he says, “introduces a non-synchronous, incommensurable gap in the midst of storytelling” through which “the nation speaks its disjunctive narrative” and “disturbs the homogenizing myth of cultural anonymity.”<sup>4</sup> At the margins and from “the insurmountable extremes of storytelling,” Bhabha asserts, “we encounter the question of cultural difference as the perplexity of living, and writing, the nation.”<sup>5</sup> Cultural difference then is both crucial to, and an analogy for, heterogeneous texts and the task of “living and writing the nation.” In the face of cultural difference, marginalization, and incommensurable experience, dominant ideological narratives are suspect and potentially dangerous.

Recognizing the importance of interrogating structural systems of domination through language and poetic practice, Erica Hunt further argues that “oppositional poetics and cultures form a field of related projects” that have taken “a critically active stance against forms of domination.”<sup>6</sup> Oppositional cultures, for Hunt, include “dissident [...] as well as ‘marginalized’ cultures, cutting across class, race and gender”<sup>7</sup> and she further takes up this resistance to dominant discourse in terms of poetics, explaining that

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3 Ibid., 300.

4 Ibid., 311.

5 Ibid.

6 Erica Hunt, “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics,” in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1990), 198.

7 Ibid.

conventional poetics might also be construed as the way ideology, “master narratives” are threaded into the text, in content and in genre: fiction and non-fiction, objective and subjective voice, definite and indefinite register. [...] Notions of character as a predictable and consistent identity, of plot as a problem of credibility, and theme as an elaboration of a controlling idea: all mirror official ideology’s predilection for finding and supplying if necessary the appropriate authority. Social life is reduced once again to a few great men or a narrow set of perceptions and strategies stripping the innovative of its power.<sup>8</sup>

Within the range of real and potential oppositional strategies that expand the “sense of poetics,” she writes, “a more fluid typology would favor plural strategies to remove the distance between writing and experience, at least as it is socially maintained by the binarism of fact and fiction, of identity and nonidentity.”<sup>9</sup> In terms of both form and content, greater representation of real, lived experiences and textual strategies will continue to open constructive spaces for politics and social action, potentially producing more texts that resist or rewrite “dominant modes of discourse.” Especially “in communities of color,” Hunt argues, “oppositional frames of reference are the borders critical to survival.”<sup>10</sup> Still, resistance is fraught with historical subjection to dominant modes, like “prison walls [...] constraining the new languages that must be made for resistance.”<sup>11</sup> Although oppositional practices can become “absorbed by dominant culture,”<sup>12</sup> sustained attention on these practices in writing and in other areas can also make us more accountable and place more value on difference, interconnectedness, and the greater potential for dissent and democracy.<sup>13</sup>

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8 Ibid., 199.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 200.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 203.

13 Ibid., 204–5.

In an age when memoirs have become the bestsellers and the advertising industry regularly appropriates avant-garde aesthetic strategies to sell corporate loyalty, it is as important as ever to recognize the necessary diversity of oppositional groups and practices working against oppressive regimes. Critique and revision of dominant codes from across otherwise separate camps of aesthetics and politics, and recognizing the humanity in our differences, is a politics of resistance. And the act of resistance, hope for something more.





## Whose History? Renee Gladman's *Juice*

In *Juice*, a book of four separate fictional stories, Renee Gladman constructs narrators-in-process who in various ways seek to identify as contemporary subjects while missing whole pieces of their own histories. This absence of history often results in narratives that are lacking the elements necessary for telling coherent stories, including details and background information. The stories direct our attention to the importance of history and the impossibility of articulating personal and social experience without it, especially for marginalized subjects. The stories also feel surreal in the ways they refuse to clarify what is real and what is imagined. The gaps in the narrators' own memories and lack of access to their own histories seem to disturb their personal and narrative footing and they are compulsive about making sense of what's happening around them even while sense-making becomes seemingly impossible with such a limited amount of information to work with. Throughout *Juice*, Gladman puts pressure on narrative structure, in general, and in fiction writing, in particular, in order to enact through form what is asserted in the content. The knowledge gained by the narrators (and readers), as they move through the fragments and disruption, demonstrates how narrative functions in the construction of history.

*Juice* begins with an epigraph from Alain Robbe-Grillet which reads, “[i]n the modern narrative, time seems to be cut off from its temporality. It no longer passes. It no longer completes anything,”<sup>1</sup> which quickly places readers in an atmosphere of temporal confusion along with narrators who seem to exist simultaneously in or between the past and the present. History is incomplete, and time itself becomes an essential element of interrogation. In the stories in *Juice*, there seem to be little forward movement even if, at times, there are hints of possible futures.

A French film made in 1961, Robbe-Grillet’s *Last Year at Marienbad* has no linear narrative progression but instead moves through scenes that allude to a story between two characters, a woman and a man, and the viewer can never be sure of the actual details or relevant history. Although there seems to be some past event, experience, or relationship between the two, that is never fully explained.<sup>2</sup> *Juice* in some ways echoes the film — in its formal movement between real and imaginary without narrative contextualization — and incorporates the restlessness of subjects who suddenly realize they are unsure of the past and their potential for the future. In the film, the man may be time or history itself personified to chase the woman, as if she is haunted by her past or is trying to move forward and ignore a past which refuses to be ignored. The insistence on and of the past weighs heavily while, at the same time, the woman seems unable to remember or relate to that past. Narrative scenes are played and replayed, reconstructed, cut, and re-presented so that they are similar yet different in each presentation. One reading of the film might argue that the man is the past and the woman is the perpetual, amnesiac present. And the woman’s husband, a more peripheral character, might represent a future that, in playing the game of chance throughout the film, always wins by predicting opponents’ moves, based on past moves, before mov-

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1 Renee Gladman, *Juice* (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 2000), 5.

2 Alain Resnais, dir., *L'année dernière à Marienbad* [*Last Year at Marienbad*] (Cocinor, 1961).

ing forward. The camera closes in and pulls back as if searching for perspective or to see from all angles, yet the viewer is always aware of missing narrative and visual detail. We can never really know anything about these characters, yet we see so much in the fragmentation: the difficulty and messiness of memory and history, the impossibility of a present based on an elusive history. We are left at the end of the film, when the woman leaves with the man who may be her past, with a feeling of incompleteness yet finality. The language in the end is haunting. The final scene is dark and quiet and the dialogue reflects the rigid patterns of straight lines in the French gardens when the man alludes to the “statues in frozen motion where you were already losing your way forever with me.”<sup>3</sup> This English translation of the French perpetuates the ambiguous relationship between past and present (or future). The passive voice combined with “motion,” the reference to eternity, and the paradoxical notion that one might lose her way while she is in “frozen motion” reinforces in this final yet continuing moment the temporal confusion or critique of linear temporal simplification. The narrative and the woman are surrounded by time yet can move nowhere.

The narrators in *Juice* similarly often exist in a temporal stasis in which they are consumed with an idea of a past that they don't actually have access to, and their present lives are based on incomplete histories or the gaps between dominant cultural narratives and real lived experience. Written from a first-person perspective, the first story in the book, “Translation,” reads like both a personal account and an interrogation of history, by way of the narrator's return to a presumable hometown from which everyone has disappeared. In the first paragraph she explains, “but this is not a story about me [...] this is about those of us who live among the great ink-stained mountains.”<sup>4</sup> The mountains may be signifying the space written by history, constructed through language. “Though I have cut corners to get here,” she says “these are the basics of my story: the fact of everybody's

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3 Ibid.

4 Gladman, *Juice*, 8.

disappearance, a conviction of flight and return, and a loneliness so startling that people will want to paint it.”<sup>5</sup> When she returns to the town, no one else is living there. The story enacts the struggle of an individual cut off from her identity as part of larger collective.

Performing a kind of genealogical history, the narrator works to incorporate the history of the community into her own contemporary understanding of herself and to find a voice with which to articulate her particular experiences within that history. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Michel Foucault contends that past and present are not continuous in a linear and progressive way but that the past occurs disbursed and in discontinuities. In order to understand history we should look to local specificities, read the body as primary text and cultural object, and think of history as a relational force. If we are formed as social/cultural subjects, then we must look to the details, the gaps, the relations between seemingly disparate elements in order to better understand history. As a practice, genealogy is a way of doing history that breaks from linear and totalizing narratives of historical documentation. As an argument for thinking of history as process, genealogy recognizes incongruities and inconsistencies instead of blindly following ideologically constructed history. It can be used to see the material forces and details that constitute the past and affect the present, and to interrogate historical knowledge. Foucault explains that “the traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled.”<sup>6</sup> A genealogical method of doing history can uncover the debris, linger in the narrative gaps, and might ultimately allow for the silenced voices and invisible subjects to tell their stories.

A material example of uncovering the debris, “Translation” incorporates the subject of archeology, both literally and meta-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 88.

phorically, into its narrative. The narrator explains, “everything I know began the first summer I was in an archeological gang.”<sup>7</sup> This immediately points to the importance of history for the original people of her community, and their actions as, potentially, a kind of communal resistance to dominant modes: instead of a research group, they call themselves a gang, and they work on recovering the artifacts of their collective history. Or, as the narrator says, “[t]he town established a gang of archeologists to explore the facts of our extended history,” which also shows how the material fragments of the past can be used to (re)narrate the facts of history that may have been left out of other accounts. For the narrator, the material artifacts are key to understanding more about their history especially because “it seems that some relatives were in a hurry and gave abbreviated narratives.”<sup>8</sup> History is also not only temporal, but spatial. The artifacts are stored in what she calls the “past shelter,” an actual physical space used to store the past. Only later do we learn that her brother was the one who found the “break in the mountain or narrow upper cave” that was to become the shelter.<sup>9</sup> We learn also that the children acted as the caretakers of the artifacts of the town’s history, and that an implied sexual abstinence suggests a sense of possibility that lies in the past instead of the future. Since, she explains, “communication between lovers was spatial [...] contact was not desired; one was satisfied with what seemed like endless possibility, and so, dwelled in that.”<sup>10</sup> The array of the fragments of the past offers the children a space in which to create and dwell, bringing past and present together. The possibility of imagining the future was, however, more complicated:

The emotion behind this story is colored by events that would be lethal to repeat. That is, their unfolding would un-

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<sup>7</sup> Gladman, *Juice*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

leash a polluted something beyond anyone's comprehension. No science can explain what propels this story. The land can hardly contain its volatile nature. Anyone observing my predicament would wonder why I have continued on. But, in a way, because there are no observers, I have no choice but to go on.<sup>11</sup>

One wonders if such recognition of the facts of history in the present somehow led to the difficult if not impossible future implied in this passage. This even while history seems to unfold or be constructed as it is being told, that "[n]o science can explain what propels this story," leads us to consider whether she is referring to the content of the story, the method of its construction, or the complex interplay between these. And the land as the physical text of history hardly contains the "volatile nature" of the story even as it evokes real histories of people who had little control over its telling. How, she seems to ask, is a volatile history smoothed into a cohesive narrative? How does an individual, or a single narrative, embody and disperse a difficult history? Even after the narrator recognizes the incompatibility of content (the volatile events) with method and form (how to tell these stories), she realizes stories must nonetheless be shared in a way that recognizes the difficulty of telling; there is no possibility of narrative unity to smooth things over.

In the next section, we learn that the narrator's brother "was a pioneer" because "he discovered a place that was not too close to our present lives where we could store our heirlooms."<sup>12</sup> It is curious that the heirloom storage place is "not too close to our present lives," and one wonders both about the nature of the relation between artifacts of the past, and present understanding, as well as the grammatical confusion and significance of "our present lives": which present is she talking about? The rest of the paragraph is more clearly in the past tense and we read that "the town as a whole felt discomfort around these "gifts" from the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 12.

past,” as if they were not their own heirlooms.<sup>13</sup> And, the narrator further explains, “[i]n order to believe in them [the “gifts”], we did not want to see them.”<sup>14</sup> It seems clear that artifacts — and facts — of the past can be difficult to deal with and make sense of, and that somehow the artifacts as unseen by the community may have helped create a system of belief that enabled a kind of distance allowing history to exist in the present. The town “could not face the proximity of the past and did not want to use it either,” and so they brought the things that “their forefathers had left them” to the “past shelter” for storage.

The narrator, however, tells us that her home is “right outside the shelter” and she “would want to go there” and “hang out with the things that root my people,” hoping, as she says, “that upon their return I will have missed them less.”<sup>15</sup> The spatialized present is rooted in the physical artifacts of history as the narrator imagines that upon the return of her people, a gesture toward the future, she “will have missed them less.” This grammatically correct sentence is also one in which narrator and reader alike, for a moment, dwell in present, past, and future simultaneously. Further, these passages reiterate the fragmentation of the past in the present — the narrator has only these few artifacts (fragments, shards of “history”) and no real history. They also illustrate the consequences for subjects — e.g., the townspeople and the narrator — denied the ability to access and narrate their own histories.

Near the end of “Translation,” we get just a hint of what may have happened to the narrator’s people: “[m]any years back there was a virus ravaging us — made the black skin of my neighbors turn toward the moon. [...] Bear in mind this is a land without normal science.”<sup>16</sup> When the experiences of a group of people don’t match dominant cultural narratives of “the nation,” other accounts must be made available. When individuals’ stories are

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 16.



left out and material history ignored, it becomes necessary to actively dismantle hegemonic narrative history with an openness and responsibility to what has otherwise been cast aside. Through "Translation" Gladman considers the messiness of the materials of history—experiences and artifacts—and takes readers on a journey with the narrator who is trying to figure out how to deal with the effects of the past in the present. But when there are no suitable narratives, or no narratives at all, what is left for the narrator to do? "When a tribe has been reduced to one, there is no talk of remedy," she says, "[w]ell, there is no talk. As a town, we had the most intriguing conversations. Now I play with leaves."<sup>17</sup> Gladman seems to be using this narrator to ask how and why whole groups of people have been neglected in the histories constructed thus far and how new histories can be written.

The last section of "Translation" includes spirits and a return to archaeology. The spirits of the past "are said to teach people about death," but the narrator claims to instead teach the spirits—the present informs the past. The narrator sits on this constantly moving line that falls between the past and present, at the interstice that joins the ancestors, the histories, and the possibility of the return of her people. In order to save history and any potential future, one has to save the land, and, she says, "to save this land I have to bring back archeology."<sup>18</sup> Further, she continues, "[i]n the appearance of any species there is an element of its disappearance and within its disappearance a particle of return. And that is why we have storage."<sup>19</sup> The present storage of memories, fragments, and material pieces of history keeps one close to the past while awaiting the potential of return. And even though there may seem to be little or no past to access, even a "particle" or "germ" can keep the cycle going:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

In our past there is a germ for survival, beneath our weathered clothes and yellowed papers, a propellant of time. If I wanted to I could spend the rest of my days devoted to time. Or end the township here for something on the other side of the mountains [...] is there life there? Well, it does not matter if there is life because I am not leaving this mountain-side. It has been six years since the exodus. A year since I last spoke. I have forty-two years left of health, and anticipate five hundred years before the great tidal wave. Things here slowly returning to slime and translation.<sup>20</sup>

Simultaneously, she looks toward the future and recedes into the past — “returning to slime and translation.” This is no starting place or point of origin, but a return to process and potential. The slime is what is left after receding into the past but is also what will be used as the material for whatever will grow next. Translation is a process. History is translated into narratives that maintain the status quo, or narratives are translated into fragmented networks that complicate the possibility of cohesive histories. When something is translated, it can be mistranslated or undergo a change of some kind within the text, thus opening a space for alternative knowledge or understanding to emerge. We leave “Translation” in the space of translation, of process, of the return to the space of possibility. Following Foucault, utilizing a genealogical practice for narrating history can also be also a political project in the ways attention is paid to otherwise silenced voices and ruptures within cohesive narrative textures. Instead of determining the future through the reproduction of mainstream ideologies, the present and past include the fragments, fissures, and breaks from which might emerge the potential for recognition of real and lived histories.

The third story in *Juice*, “No Through Street,” reiterates some of the same concerns through a narrator who is alone and unable to form any connections to the people around her. Reading the story, one wonders whether or not the other characters actu-

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20 Ibid., 19–20.

ally existed in the life of the narrator or were simply imagined. There are many missed connections between the narrator and others. And the movement between the narrator's memories of her past and her contemporary moment show the necessary difficulty of relating the two. When the narrator returns to the street of her childhood after leaving it fifteen years before, she confronts her past: "[s]ix days after my return, I stood again at the head of Hershey Street, still unable to surrender my past to its obvious transformation. It was by accident that I found myself there." Between that past and the present, she spent her time riding on trains "going east to west."<sup>21</sup> Hershey Street comes to represent a past that the narrator has otherwise avoided or forgotten: "[f]or twelve of the fourteen years that I know I was on trains, I was wondering about my body" and only during "the last three of the fourteen years, I had vivid dreams of my long-lost street."<sup>22</sup> Finally, years later, she finds herself face to face with her street and the memories of her sister, who as it turns out, has become a famous painter of street signs — including that of "Hershey Street."

Physically reentering the spaces of her past causes the narrator to respond with a mixture of feelings, memories, and details, explaining that "the feelings that anchored me the other day to the sign, *Slow to Bridge*, were not feelings as much as they were remembrances. I think I see our childhood in that sign." Sometimes, "consulting the signs for direction," she says, "I [...] am brought back to the highlights of my past. I can remember things in a way I cannot at the head of the 'new' Hershey Street. I believe that if I saw my sister she would tell me more about my life, but if I have learned anything from my past, it's that I must pace myself."<sup>23</sup> The signs point to the past and seem necessary for understanding her place in the present, yet there is a hesitation, and a slowing down. One must pace oneself in the journey into the past. And, the narrator leads us to believe, one

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 33–34.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 39.

remembers differently depending on spatial location and physical context. The signs point to her past but the “new” Hershey Street represents a present that she’s not a part of. And as readers we never get a real sense of the childhood remembered by the narrator or the gap between that and her feeling of displacement in the present space of return.

Eventually, the narrator goes to the museum where her sister has been invited to paint and exhibit her signs. It is here that the past in relation to present should come together, made whole by the narrator’s sister who can fill in some of the blanks in the story. However, the narrator finds that

the woman in tattered, paint-splashed clothes with kinky black and tan hair outlining the beginning of what probably will be a spectacular piece of art was not my sister. She didn’t even impersonate her when I walked up. She simply said that she had never heard of me.

And I believe her. But then, where is my sister? And if this woman is the directionalist whom everyone knows about, who is my sister?<sup>24</sup>

We can read a number of things here: the difference between the real and the imagined story, the perception of identity that may not match up to some outside reality, the difficulty of making sense of one’s past in the present when some of the details are missing, and the complex relation between the stories of self and of others. The narrator, existing mainly in the past of this space to which she has returned, in the end has no relation to the present. But the present without the past also makes little sense. We might also wonder why the “directionalist” sister, who is apparently not the narrator’s real sister, is in the museum painting signs for which she has become famous in the real world of the streets. But maybe this is an apt metaphor for the relation

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 44.

between real, individual experience and its “translation” into institutionalized narratives.

In *Politics Out of History*, Wendy Brown calls Foucault’s genealogical method an “other way of conceiving the familiar.” She considers the past in relation to the present as well as relations between individuals and others.<sup>25</sup> Genealogical history, she writes, “is precisely the opposite of teleological history; indeed it is in a permanent quarrel with teleological history, insofar as it treats the present as the accidental production of the contingent past, rather than treating the past as the sure and necessary road to the inevitable present.”<sup>26</sup> Using terms like “contingent” and “accidental” emphasizes the focus on possibility instead of determination. The present is the consequence of fractured and myriad details of history. History, in these terms, cannot be thought of as teleological because the potential for change precludes predetermined end points. Brown writes, “genealogy reorients the relationship of history to political possibility [...] in place of the lines of determination laid down by laws of history, genealogy appears as a field of openings — faults, fractures, and fissures.”<sup>27</sup> The present is no longer constrained by its histories but is able to break through totalizing historical narratives, and to look for “openings for disturbance” in which lie the potential for change, action, and politics.<sup>28</sup>

To break through the myths and narratives and see what is left out, disruption is imperative. Brown writes, “the measure of genealogy’s success is its disruption of conventional accounts of ourselves — our sentiments, bodies, origins, futures. It tells a story that disturbs our habits of self-recognition, posing an ‘us’ that is foreign.”<sup>29</sup> This is not unlike how the narrator in “Translation” moves through time and space with the feeling that the present has been “disturbed” by, or because of, the past. Unsure

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25 Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 96.

26 Ibid., 103.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 106.

of herself, she says, “I know that I am not the ‘me’ of ten days ago — I certainly do not look like that ‘me’ or how I thought of her.”<sup>30</sup> And in “No Through Street,” when the narrator comes face to face with the person she thought of as her sister and the key to knowing more about her past, she realizes they are not related and don’t even recognize each other. This disrupts the narrator’s understanding of herself and any key to what had been her potential past which, suddenly, seems no longer possible.

This inability to identify with the past highlights a problem with constructions of identity based on passively consumed narrative accounts. Brown explains that counterforces and discontinuity in the narrative logic call attention to otherwise perceived continuity.<sup>31</sup> These other forces are enacted in the structure and narrative strategies of Gladman’s stories. “Story” happens in the broken logic of narrative form as it mingles with the content of specific detail. In *Juice* Gladman’s narrators take on this genealogical method as a political act. They stand in view of the layered and textured histories from which they have emerged, even while the details are fragmented and sometimes invisible. “No Through Street” ends with the narrator back on a train “that moves smartly with so many destinations it essentially has none.”<sup>32</sup> Brown’s argument that genealogical history opens possibilities rather than determines outcomes resonates here, and the “fractures in history become the material of possibility in the present [...] — ‘virtual fractures’ as Foucault writes, ‘open up the space of freedom.’”<sup>33</sup> The fractures, fissures, breaks, and gaps in the text itself, like in history, make way for political possibility in which the present does not have to be pre-determined and in which totalizing narratives might be translated into processes for change. The seemingly static nature of time in Glad-

30 Gladman, *Juice*, 14.

31 Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 106.

32 Gladman, *Juice*, 45.

33 Michel Foucault, “Critical Theory/Intellectual History,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1990), 36, quoted in Brown, *Politics out of History*, 113.

man's stories is a strategy of an interrogative translation project. Creating a static present gives narrators an opportunity to delve into the past and find weaknesses and fractures. Gladman's narrators are adrift in part because they are in process of finding a present that has not been predetermined, and they create alternative forms of narrative that are also processes for change. This may, in Brown's terms, "reorient[s] the relationship of history to political possibility."<sup>34</sup> Breaking with narrative as hegemonic and ideological allows the narrators in these stories to act as vehicles for political action, setting up new ways of bringing the past into the present, and thereby investing in greater openness to possibilities for the future.

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<sup>34</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 103.

## A Crisis of Memory: Pamela Lu's *Pamela: A Novel*

The reliance on memory in the age of memoir has become a topic of skepticism, especially in the wake of controversies like James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*.<sup>1</sup> As readers though, maybe we are sometimes too willing to suspend disbelief in favor of the thrill of the story; we want the gritty details to be true. But what happens when a subject, upon sitting down to write her memoir, realizes she has no memory, no connection to the recorded details of history to share? This kind of disconnect between history and personal experience has often been a theme in literary texts in which a protagonist struggles to exist in a present that is a consequence of history—both real histories of oppression and history as narrated by those oppressive dominant forces. The protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for example, in trying to assert his voice as a Black man in pre-civil rights, mid-twentieth-century America fades into invisibility and at moments seems in danger of ceasing to exist altogether. Or Audre

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<sup>1</sup> Frey published *A Million Little Pieces* in 2003 as a memoir, went on Oprah and sold over two million copies, and then was invited back to the show and was confronted by Oprah after a report confirmed that many of the details in the book had been fictionalized. Oprah and many readers were upset that he had claimed that the stories in the book were true when many had in fact been embellished or fabricated. He admitted to the lies and confessed that he originally tried to sell the book as fiction.



Lorde, in writing *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, subtitled, “A Biomythography,” struggles to come to terms with the incongruous and often painful details of her own experience in relation to historical and social narratives about women of color. Pamela Lu’s *Pamela: A Novel* explores the effects of history on marginalized subjects, the challenges of memory even under favorable conditions, and the unreliability of narrative. Lu and her narrator recognize narrative as another tool reinforcing the status quo of white hegemony and investigate identity-related experience through non/narrative formal strategies and fictional content. The narrator mimics the representation of self in the media, and in society more widely, and struggles to find a clear notion of how one goes about re-presenting memory and past experience. Not only is *Pamela* a critique of the genre of autobiography itself, but it further argues that narrative autobiography is especially problematic for people who have little access to history outside of those narratives culturally constructed for them. Lu’s narrator, P — all of the characters are designated by single letters — tells us, for example, that for her and her group of Asian American friends, their “history” as narrated for them “was not ‘based’ on anything” but that “our virtual existence sponsored itself and did not conform to any standard of correctness or realism, because such an original standard did not exist.”<sup>2</sup> The theme of virtual existence runs through the text. The narrator theorizes memory through a kind of anti-autobiography, and the difficulty of creating a text based on memory is foregrounded through the narrator’s knowledge that her own memories have been constructed by mainstream, consumer-commodity culture. Lu’s narrator (re)constructs her own past through the formal strategies of the text itself: there is no clear narrative progression and there are gaps between reported events and the continuous commentary that runs through. What stands in place of “meaningful” memory are experiences, events, and conversations that are recalled, but not inhabited. The past moments are not brought to life through detail and

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2 Pamela Lu, *Pamela: A Novel* (Berkeley: Atelos, 1998), 20.

image in the present moment but instead, the text seems to illustrate, there can be no genuine, remembered experiences for the socially constructed subject, even if one believes in the search for those experiences. It becomes a conundrum in which the narrator desires subjective admittance to a past to which there seems to be no access.

In place of a sense of self-understanding, a fragmented subjectivity emerges in *Pamela*. P's awareness that there may be only constructed, often incoherent selves, comes to function in place of a lucid narrative identity. Meta-narration as a formal strategy situates P as a non/narrative subject aware of her own formation by way of ideology and hegemonic forces which we see, for example, when she explains, "[o]ur silence and invisibility was of the utmost importance to the state of the nation because the very suggestion of us challenged and undermined the simplicity of narrative on which the national identity depended."<sup>3</sup> Lu's narrator functions as one reporting a life instead of remembering. She seems to understand that a lack of real memory combined with too much culturally constructed memory offers little foundation on which to set the present and which creates anxiety around any possibility of moving into the future. This is enacted in the circular, non-progressive nature of the narrative; there are no starting or ending points to this story. Lu foregrounds language and the formal properties of the text as a way to critique the generally unquestioned reliance on memory in autobiographical texts. She presents a narrator who is overly intellectualized, parodic, and campy but always cognizant of a persistent critique of subjectivity for the modern subject, utilizing theoretical terminology to both enact and critique that theory. The text foregrounds apprehension about written autobiography, particularly for the marginalized subject with a conflicted relations to memory and history. Lu may be asking if there is even a self to write, or to read. And it is the very nature of such a subject as having little more than a fragmented, present existence divorced from history and the history of one's own memories

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3 Ibid., 29.

that troubles her ability to remember outside of mediated culture. *Pamela* questions the viability of personal memory as a foundation on which to base a subjective present identity, but she also submits that there can be no present existence, no sense of coherent identity if there is no personal memory on which to base this self.

The structure of the text enacts the function and process of complex memory—the combination of personal and often problematic historical/social memory—that is under scrutiny. It also denotes differences between real and imagined past events and the fact that we—“we” the readers of the novel, and “we” the remembering subjects of our own lives—often can’t tell the difference. It’s also not simply the difference between real and imagined that’s important, but the recognition of that difference and the slippage between them. The imaginary exemplifies the virtual aspects of memory representation, and reported events are at the mercy of the uncertain subjectivity of the narrator. Because none of the characters, including the narrator, are developed fully, many narrative details feel incomplete, and the lack of detail seems to make it difficult for P to speak or perform her identity. For example, early on the narrator remarks, “I did not have a personality that I could effectively project outward, and in my worst moments, I did not have a personality at all. I was a very poor impersonator of myself in public.”<sup>4</sup> The difficulty comes in the recognition that if there can be no authentic experience, there can be no authentic memory, and thus no identity that might manifest in “personality.” This also serves as a critique of “authenticity” as an impossible endeavor in itself. A fragmented modern subject may have a sense of a past which is not necessarily her past, and this further entails a lack of personal connection to her own history. As P says,

we found it natural, if not imperative, to be assaulted and overwhelmed by memories which were not our own but which we nevertheless carried as though they had actually

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4 Ibid., 13.

happened to us. In this sense, the history of our lives was always the history of something else. We were forever displacing ourselves in the chain of events without knowing who exactly was doing the displacing, and our lifetime goal, if we desired success in the conventional sense, consisted not in getting to know ourselves, but in getting to know ourselves less.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of near-identification recurs throughout the text and is most pronounced when the narrator and her friends try to make sense of their individual ethnic identities, as Asian Americans, in the context of an accumulation of cultural myths about ethnicity. Whether the past is real or imaginary, remembered or forgotten, it is fundamental for the articulation of a subject in the present, but the danger also resides in one's presumed history turning out to be "the history of something else." Through her narrator, Lu also points out a greater historical trauma of modernity. She shows through these non/narrative strategies how one may be unable to give her own account when that potential account is underdetermined by such a lack of access to her own history.

The relation to the past is infected by contemporary media culture in *Pamela*, and at times traumatic history is conflated with its mediated representation. Pierre Nora theorizes the relation between a kind of "real memory," which only existed in pre-historic cultures, and a memory tainted by media culture. He writes, "we have seen the tremendous dilation of our very mode of historical perception, which, with the help of the media, has substituted for a memory entwined in the intimacy of a collective heritage the ephemeral film of current events."<sup>6</sup> Or, as P explains, "just as R experienced the grim humor of situations whose anxieties predated her, so she appeared at times to inhabit the outline of a self, formed half a century ago — that

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5 Ibid., 33.

6 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–8.

is, R was not a WWII survivor but she might as well have been; she was not a great moment in history, but she played one on TV.<sup>77</sup> One thing that is apparent is the continuity of some kind of past in the present. R inhabits a self from the past as if she cannot be held responsible for it in her own present. In a way, specific historical moments take on lives of their own as they are passed around through stories, texts, and modern media and come to form vital elements of individuals' existences. The great moments in history, whoever decides what these are, are played over and over on TV, or we replay great historical moments as if they were scenes from our own lives.

In mediated culture, messages and memories circulate and are consumed. As subjects we are constructed in no small part through our media saturated society. Instead of simply accepting that one's identity may be based on myths and illusions, *Pamela* asserts that a marginalized subject whose stories are culturally constructed for her, might have to differently negotiate that social construction of experience and claim a present of her own to inhabit. The subject's power over her past, and therefore over her present, is manipulated at every turn. "It was as if television had trained us to be nostalgic from the start," P explains, "so that we yearned for childhood while we were still children and continued to be nostalgic for the present moment before we had finished living it."<sup>78</sup> For the narrator and her friends, the sense of the loss of something they never had in the first place comes to take the place of a present based on first-hand experience. The marginalized subjects have been both made invisible and created through mediated narratives.

The mediation of experience also helps perpetuate consumer culture as the commodity displaces memory by way of the erasure of its production and history. In *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, Richard Terdiman invokes Marx and the idea of "genesis amnesia," or the forgetting of the origin and history of commodity production. Through this "process of reifi-

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7 Lu, *Pamela*, 69.

8 Ibid., 31.

cation,” the history of commodities, including the “memory of their production from their consumers, as from the very people who produced them,” becomes hidden.<sup>9</sup> Further, he writes, “to understand what we have made, we have to be able to *remember* it. Because commodities suppress the memory of their own process, they subvert or violate this fundamental tenet of the *mnemonic* economy.”<sup>10</sup> The loss of memory helps the capitalist system to articulate its subjects as consumers. If there is only a notion of the commodity in the present, then each new commodity will have an autonomous life of its own. In place of a history of production and identificatory experience, consumer culture is constructed through the mediation and commodification of identity, inhibiting any present-tense understanding of memory and the past. In *Pamela*, Lu seems to be examining what happens to subjects who are either cut off entirely from their own sense of history or who only have a sense of history created as an ideological social formation which serves to keep subjects embedded within the capitalist system.

The present for which the narrator and her friends yearn resembles a sort of virtual existence based on imagined ideas that circulate throughout mainstream culture. It is a present made of pieces that always fail to add up to a whole, their experiences held together by their desire to have a past that culminates in some type of authentic present. Of her situation, P laments:

Such was the promise of a manicured lawn, a two-car garage, and a swastika on every corner, and life there paralleled the experience of a badly written sentence, whose construction consisted of numerous phrases, each of which amounted to a complete sentence in itself, but whose sum total was less than its parts, an idea amputated in mid-thought, a non sequitur.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 12.

10 Ibid.

11 Lu, *Pamela*, 42.

She draws an analogy between racist history that is alive in the present and “a badly written sentence” made of many phrases that ultimately add up to nothing. P seems to ask how it is that one is supposed to function in the present, and move into the future, in the face of historical violence and distorted narrative—based on lies and false connections—and that link the promise of social mobility to white privilege granted by way of American history, a privilege that silences the stories of others. Extending the analogy she adds, “we were fortunate, for the most part, to get through life holding onto a complete sentence, and luckier still if we could salvage an entire paragraph, rescued from the wreckage that was the great historical-cultural narrative.”<sup>12</sup> Writing functioning here, literally and metaphorically, as being an important key to locating identity and revising dominant historical ideologies.

Throughout *Pamela*, the actions and descriptions of the characters, as narrated by P, demonstrate the complex ways subjects struggle to make sense of their present lives in relation to the messaging always already constructing their identities in the world. For example,

C wrote with all the awful clarity and slenderness of someone who had grown up Asian in Indiana, the memory of anger and that daily experience of coming home single to watch the double of his face peel away from itself in the mirror now sublimated into a stunning command of the English language that manifested itself as poetry, or a series of eloquent, articulate stabs at reality. [...] If C worked in the sanctity of silence, then YJ was always living and writing against a blind wall of cacophony that existed somewhere between plain sense and the din of cultural expectation and popular music [...]

As a consequence, she occupied the contemporary position of always being foreign to herself.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

Although awareness may be explicit or intuited, the action (or consequence) of this kind of Du Boisian double consciousness shows the physical and emotional battle of existing in a world in which one doesn't seem to exist as well as in using language that isn't one's own.<sup>14</sup> The incongruence between poetry, eloquence, and metaphorical "stabs at reality" alerts readers to violence done by assimilation. If the contemporary is the space in which awareness is possible, the cost of that is "writing against a blind wall of cacophony," and always "being foreign" to oneself, signaling that neither silence nor noise can alleviate the tension between the "plain sense"<sup>15</sup> of subjective experience and the dominance of media-perpetuated, cultural expectations and socially reinforced prejudices.

Explaining that memory cannot occur outside of its cultural context, Nora further considers the role of representation in relation to different kinds of memory and what one might do in the context of one's historical situation:

How can we fail to read [...] the will to make the history we are reconstructing equal to the history we have lived? We could speak of mirror-memory if all mirrors did not reflect the same — for it is in difference that we are seeking, and in the image of this difference, the ephemeral spectacle of an unrecoverable identity. It is no longer genesis that we seek but instead the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer.<sup>16</sup>

In the gap between "what we are and what we are no longer," we see that the original event cannot be reproduced, only represented. Remembering, recovering, and documenting memory is thus a process of decipherment. This awareness is key to the representation of memory in relation to identity because one has to

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14 See W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk," in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Irvin Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986).

15 Lu, *Pamela*, 17.

16 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," 17–18.



read herself through difference, through the space of what is no longer recoverable. Lu seems keenly aware of just this: her text is a hybrid process of deciphering and representing memory as a means of further theorizing the construction and function of identity.

Another example of this occurs in the middle of *Pamela*, in which, in a moment of meta-fictional commentary, the narrator and author become intertwined. A discussion of the text itself arises in which the author takes over narration to theorize memory and the process of its documentation as autobiographical writing. She reflects on the separation between narrator and writer, between the self of the past and the self of the present, and the difficulty of communication between these versions of self. The author/narrator explains:

I found the story of myself to be endlessly fascinating, with its catalogue of histories, repressions, and picaresque cast of characters. [...] It was a classic story of joy, disappointment, and discovery, and I often reread my favorite parts in my spare time, vicariously living [...] as if I were actually P going about her business in a world more believable than my own.<sup>17</sup>

At the end of this passage it's unclear who is speaking. Is the narrator divorced from her own sense of self when she reads her accounts in writing? Or is the writer including her own comment on the estranging nature of witnessing one's life documented in the text? The author/narrator further explores the relativity of this situation:

There was the subjunctive of the real character speculating about the imaginary situation, the fictitious character speculating about the real situation, and then of the fictitious character speculating about the even more fictitious situa-

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<sup>17</sup> Lu, *Pamela*, 57.

tion, which could prove to be either totally unimaginable or, equivalently, as unimaginative as the plain facts.<sup>18</sup>

The contingency and possibility, the merging and movement between fact and fiction, memory and speculation, and experience and the text as the documentation of experience, purposely complicate the reading. The text is the construction of the already constructed experiences of a shifting narrator-self who is unsure of her own place in the writing and reading of the text. Like Lu's characters living double or multiple lives as both ignored and ideologically constructed subjects, coming to understand more about the context and consequences becomes both essential and potentially debilitating. The characters are also continually in process of theorizing and living both their media constructed and "real" experiences through creative and social endeavors. Lu's author/narrator further explains, "I could hardly read my story without at least on some level reading myself into it," and "if I was at risk of suddenly becoming P in the midst of a plausible situation, then P was similarly at risk of becoming not me but *Pamela*, a project that I had invented to include both P and me, and that was expanding, day by day, into a larger persona than either of us could handle."<sup>19</sup> The movement between *Pamela* (the text), P (the narrator/main character), and "me" (the writer) is explicitly exposed and confused, or as *they* explain, "Pamela threatened to subsume us in a state of suspended animation, stranding P in the past and me in the present. [...] P was an act of memory but Pamela was an act of homicide" which assembled "the particulars of my private existence into a form suitable for larger display."<sup>20</sup> The form suitable for display, we might interpret, is the autobiographical text. Although a writer is presumably in control of its construction, the text can itself take over and ultimately function on its own terms, subsuming the "real" experiences of the subject.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 57–58.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 59.

This section from *Pamela* also suggests that temporal movement is completely disturbed when a life is presented as a text of memory and the lines demarcating the tenses become frozen in print. The author/narrator tells us, "I had terrible fears of being abandoned not only by Pamela but by that abbreviated version of Pamela, P, who survived the present tense by avoiding it altogether and prolonged the past by inflecting it into a space of indefinite duration, like a note of music stretched out and played repeatedly to make a landscape."<sup>21</sup> The past is prolonged to the exclusion of the present, and although the author/narrator reading the document of the past can relate and enjoy it as story, there's also a physical analogy of the text as container of the past. The narrator, P, is able to avoid the difficulty of the "reality" of the present tense, but this only has negative consequences for the author/narrator who is further separated into irreconcilable parts of herself (Pamela, P, "me"). If the past cannot be accessed except through reading it as (possibly someone else's) story, it is also possible that the self of the present tense can have no authentic experiences, since those are always turning into past experiences which cannot be accessed. Those are not then part of a past of useful memory and thus elide the present altogether. On a textual level, the author is ultimately pushed aside by the narrator and the text which then come to stand in for "authentic" experience, and which may also be a critique of reading for authenticity in narrative autobiography. At the end of this section the author/narrator states, "[i]f P was the wallpaper to the house that was Pamela, then I was the resident who paced restlessly through the halls, shutting the storm windows all around and watching the rain happen not to me, but to my house."<sup>22</sup> In only one sentence, Lu illustrates the layers of identity and the negotiation of memory and mediation. One might interpret that "I" lies within, or under, the layers of "house" and "wallpaper," contextualized by outside elements. Pamela is the structure, or the public-facing identity. And P is the "decoration" or narrative

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 61.

representation. However it's specifically interpreted, it can be read as an image that captures not just a double, but a multiple consciousness.

Lu speculates on possibilities for history and memory in literature, apparently asking if there are alternative means of representing the past or rearticulating the incoherencies of time and subjectivity. Terdiman is especially interested in the "deeply historicized relation between the problem of memory on the one hand and the representation of experience on the other" in literary or historical texts.<sup>23</sup> He notes how memory shifted with the rise of historiography and the documentation of memory. When we remember, for example, memories and past experiences circulate among the present moment and there is less distinction between past and present. When memory is documented as history, the text contains and defines the memory as past, and it becomes less personally accessible. Using the example of post-revolutionary Europe as it moved into the nineteenth century, Terdiman defines this "memory crisis" as "a sense that their past had somehow evaded memory, that recollection had ceased to integrate with consciousness. In this memory crisis, the very coherence of time and of subjectivity seemed disarticulated."<sup>24</sup> It becomes a crisis because "memory is the modality of our relation to the past" and further, Terdiman asserts that "memory stabilizes subjects and constitutes the present. It is the name we give to the faculty that sustains continuity in collective and in individual experience."<sup>25</sup> If there is no memory, or if there is a fear for the loss of memory, the effect may be on the continuity of the subject and of a culture as it moves from past into present. The instability of identity and subjectivity in *Pamela* echoes this kind of memory crisis. The consequences as they play out for Lu's characters enact Terdiman's contention that "memory functions in every act of perception, in every act of intellection, in

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23 Terdiman, *Present Past*, ix.

24 *Ibid.*, 3-4.

25 *Ibid.*, 7-8.

every act of language.”<sup>26</sup> In this case, the lack of access to memory has consequences across perception, thought, and language. *Pamela* seems to theorize this function and crisis of history as a crisis of memory in late-capitalism. For Terdiman, “what is at stake is nothing less than how a culture imagines the representation of the past to be possible, for the problem of representing the past is really the representation problem itself, seized in its most critical locus in experience.”<sup>27</sup> In *Pamela*, Asian American experience is shaped and articulated in the context of capitalist modernity. If there is no way out of this structure, the text seems to suggest, then subjects must find narrative alternatives. Lu’s characters, and the author/narrator meta-commentary, work through their own memories (or lack of) and experiences (real and virtual), critiquing the loss of access to history while imagining alternative models of representation.

As *Pamela* theorizes its own construction as an investigation into representation and memory, it might also be set alongside a literary text arguably the most commonly referred to in discussions of memory theory, Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way*.<sup>28</sup> In *Pamela*, feelings are often employed in place of the specific details of memory; this is not unlike Proust’s Swann, who can only remember his feelings in response to a sonata and its general architecture before he hears it again and imprints the detail of its sound on his memory. In a way, *Pamela* is like the moment before Swann hears the sonata for the second time. The past events recorded are little more than structure; there is no detail, and there is nothing to fill in the basic architecture. There is feeling and sentiment throughout *Pamela* about the past, but what is lacking are the details that bring a document of memory to life. Although the writing gestures toward the details of the past and toward what is missing or under the surface, it calls into question the idea that there is anything under the surface to get to. It

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>28</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 1: *Swann’s Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terrence Kilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 2003).

might be argued that *Pamela* sets memory on the surface, before the Proustian moment of remembering in detail. But if *Pamela* enacts memory as little more than surface material, it's the narrator who suffers the consequences, who is unable to form a coherent sense of her own identity.

Lu further represents past, present, and future spatially, recognizing the problematic nature of simple, linear conceptions of the progressive movement of time. Seeing the present moment as constantly shifting forward from the past but never quite moving into the future might result in a distorted sense of space-time, a complex layering of past and present in any moment or image. The narrator tells us that "for a while I had been struck by the passage of time as a spatial passage, which drowned me at random intervals in old familiar places I had never been," and then she shares a particular moment in which she witnesses the visual details of a memory of a garden from childhood while looking out the window of a train. She explains, "I was not remembering the garden itself, but the most accurate perception of it, that is, I was remembering the exact feeling of my eyes and mouth and the exact position and tension of the muscles in my arms that would have occurred had I actually been in a garden in the residential section of Pasadena with my mother 22 years ago, which I had not."<sup>29</sup> What is important is the feeling, and the experience of memory, even if there is no original event with which it is actually attached. This scene shows us the power of narrative as the memory is first narrated: "I had grown accustomed to riding my train with a book in one hand and looking out the window from time to time to rediscover the magnolia garden my mother and I had passed while walking through a Pasadena neighborhood when I was two: the shade of sky and fleeting shape of sidewalk were exactly as I remembered," afterward admitting the memory has been fabricated.<sup>30</sup> The point is to remind us not to take the writing of memories at face value, but, in realizing that they are always narrated with

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<sup>29</sup> Lu, *Pamela*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

varying degrees of truth, the desire for the truth of memory in autobiographical texts is one which always falls short.

In a kind of post-Benjaminian way, and considering the concept of “utopian vision,” it might be argued that *Pamela* offers no utopian potential because there is never a concrete sense of past and memory from which to move into the future.<sup>31</sup> However, it’s the knowledge of this difficulty — this fluctuating sense of what it means to have a past filled with memory — that is hopeful and that opens toward a horizon of possibility. The text asserts that one can still have experiences, even while lacking memories, and that the text itself can be an experience, by way of both form and content. This thus comments on our modern condition in which, instead of having a clear sense of history, we are distracted by commodity-driven, media culture. We live through a constant (re)production of memory-less and content-less ideology through which subjects are unable to relate meaningfully to historical events. These effects become even more profound for the racially marginalized subject. Without a present grounded in a remembered past, one can only question her own sense of identity. Lu’s narrator tells us, “[e]very generation preoccupied itself with the struggle to produce something new — a defining moment, action, or style that would mark it as unique and constitute an answer to the question of ‘Who are you,’ or more often, ‘Who were you?’”<sup>32</sup> The tension between the past and its docu-

31 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Walter Benjamin,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/benjamin>. As Peter Osborne and Matthew Charles write for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “[t]he founding problematic of Benjamin’s thought [...] is thus here provided with a concretely historical context, in which the notion of infinity/absoluteness becomes associated with the concept of history itself. The problem: to dialectically redeem the concept of experience [*Erfahrung*] by finding an appropriate way of experiencing the crisis of experience itself. In classically ‘modern’ terms, the present is defined as a time of crisis and transition, and philosophical experience (truth) is associated with the glimpse within the present, via the past, of a utopian political future that would bring history to an end.”

32 Lu, *Pamela*, 43.

mentation contributes to an anxiety about the potential for any coherent present, the narrator stating, “[i]t seems at times that we were the only present thing in our moment, where our moment was nothing more than a wishful standard masquerading as present reality and thus more suitably situated in the future tense.”<sup>33</sup> This, in fact, is not actually about the future at all, but it critiques the present moment as “wishful” and “masquerading as reality” and therefore only imaginary, just as the future is always only imaginary because it hasn’t happened yet.

*Pamela* ends virtually, the narrator imagining being on a plane:

For some time I remained sunk in my seat, fingers clenched around the plastic armrests, until the sensation advanced and passed through me, leaving me afloat once again in the perpetual predawn light and more than willing to let the whole subject drop, in the midst of a moment that technically never existed.<sup>34</sup>

The “subject” to which the narrator refers may be the transcendent feeling of “being overlapped” and experiencing the compression of her “thoughts, actions, feelings, preoccupations, and regrets,”<sup>35</sup> or it may be to the book as a whole. If this incident on the plane never occurred, nonetheless we have the record of it here. If the events of the book never happened, still we have the documentation of those events: we have a text of (non)memory that theorizes memory, experience, and representation. Considering the larger cultural obsession with memoir, it seems important to look to texts like *Pamela* that explore memory in terms of its social and cultural contexts and that question our allegiance to dominant narratives that falsely identify us as citizens. If it is a strategy of hegemonic power structures to impose narratives that are without real content for marginalized subjects, then it

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 97.



seems a necessary endeavor to disassemble those narratives and create other possibilities for remembering and narrating. The text that theorizes memory in such a way is working against being subsumed into larger cultural and historical narratives and instead might offer outlets for personal and cultural identification and representation. As a non/narrative, anti-autobiographical text, *Pamela* functions as a kind of statement of a culturally marginalized group in opposition to the status quo of their invisibility. And the disruptive, textual strategies point to a horizon in which group identity manifests as a collection of individual stories, (re)instating those individuals as social subjects while refusing to collect them into a singular mediated identity.

## Postmodern Trauma and the Crisis of the Contemporary: Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*

In her introduction to *Everybody's Autonomy*, Juliana Spahr points to Frederick Douglass's claim that "literacy is a pathway to freedom."<sup>1</sup> Douglass would also "at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing" and that it "opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder which to get out."<sup>2</sup> Spahr further explains that Douglass came to recognize "reading as a communal, not individual act,"<sup>3</sup> that reading dependent on community might turn "into a force that can be manipulated and used as a tool of resistance to respond to the inhumanity of slavery."<sup>4</sup> Douglass helps us understand more about the inhumanity and emotional violence of history and the importance of both critical literacy and community, especially in relation to subjects' negotiation of identity within historical and contem-

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1 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Signet, 1968), 49, quoted in Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 2.

2 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 55, quoted in Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy*, 2.

3 Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy*, 3.

4 Ibid.

porary cultural contexts. Along these lines, Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* can be read as advocating for a kind of socially responsible citizenship that foregrounds cultural literacy and the imagining of futures rooted in connective community.

As a hybrid prose, memoir-style text that reflects on experiences that may or not explicitly belong to Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* functions like a documentary in which arguments are made either overtly or subtly, and specific and varied examples are presented to support main ideas repeated over the course of the text.<sup>5</sup> It engages the visual, asserting that images shape our knowledge and understanding as contemporary citizens, and that they play a role in the experiences we have and the stories we tell about our lives and our histories.

Each chapter of the book begins with a photograph of a television with static on its screen, and in the static the savvy viewer will notice the shadow of a head, what might be the reflection of the TV viewer or the reader watching the text unfold. The reader is thereby implicated in the events as they are accessed through the screen. Viewers also gain cultural and social knowledge via the TV, or the documentary text, and may be held accountable for having such knowledge. Instead of carrying forward an overarching narrative, each chapter takes up a particular event or idea. Photos are often included and relate either directly or indirectly to the idea of each chapter, and some photos are framed by the same television image that marks chapter breaks. An early section, for example, begins with the narrator explaining that she watches TV to help her fall asleep, during which time, she says, "[s]ometimes I count the commercials for antidepressants," and she describes a commercial for PAXIL which "says simply: YOUR LIFE IS WAITING." This message is in white letters against the black screen of the TV and lingers on the screen without sound. She explains that "it remains on the screen long enough so that when I close my eyes to check if I am

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5 Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004).

sleeping, instead of darkness, YOUR LIFE IS WAITING stares back at me.”<sup>6</sup> The narrator tells us that when she gets a prescription of her own, though she doesn’t say for what, she makes a list in order to decide whether or not to take the pills, concluding, “[m]y desire is to give the pills away as I might a pair of shoes I have never worn. I want to give them to a friend, to someone who could decide to throw them away.”<sup>7</sup> As a subject, she is split between the messages of the TV, the reality of chemical medication, the dream-space of night, and the daylight realization of diagnoses and prescriptions, all of which make us question the difference between the real and the imagined, between virtual, mediated experience and real life.

As readers, we get the sense that Rankine’s narrator is cursed with the ability to read the landscape of contemporary culture. She constructs an intertextual, layered critique that dismantles blind faith in stable, single-authored, linear autobiographical narrative. And she shreds the myth of “happiness” that is supposed to come with a comfortable social- and economic-class position which we are fed through various media. Highlighting problematic aspects of contemporary culture, especially in regard to race and gender, Rankine demonstrates a “relationship between literature and consciousness raising.”<sup>8</sup> She creates a complex work in which the seemingly clear and straightforward parts add up to a whole that is nonetheless disjunct. Over the course of the text, the reflection on specific events reveals a traumatic situation that transcends the personal, which in turn makes us as readers complicit in the cultural and psychic dangers that mark the crisis of the contemporary.

It makes sense to ask then if *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* is a postmodern text or simply the “story” of a postmodern subject? If “both” is the easy answer, this work is nonetheless one that explores the possibilities for postmodern subjectivity and enacts the interrogation of that through formal textual strategies.

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6 Ibid., 29.

7 Ibid., 32.

8 Spahr, *Everybody’s Autonomy*, 5.

Leigh Gilmore describes this type of text “as a site of identity production” in which the subject is both “an agent in discourse” and “is understood as necessarily discursive” or constructed according to historically and culturally specific discourses.<sup>9</sup> Using strategies that subvert narrative cohesion and refuse to give a clear account of identity, Rankine’s narrator enacts a subjective response to the gaps and contradictions in culture and (or because of) discourse, and the idea of self-representation in an autobiographical text becomes impossible. According to Gilmore, the writer of postmodern autobiography tends “to heighten the contradictions in the discourses of self-representation” and create subjects who “record the effects of fragmentation.”<sup>10</sup> Central to this postmodern subjectivity, Gilmore points out, after Emile Benveniste and Roman Jakobson, that the pronoun “I,” considered to be the narrator and subject of the autobiographical text, exists only in relation to others and asks, “what readings of autobiography are possible when the linguistic element upon which one would most wish to depend for some sense of stability [...] offers both collectivity and individuality?”<sup>11</sup> Although the text is no longer stable in terms of its presenting a unified narrator who directly transmits to readers her subjective experience, we gain something instead, in the way the text and its readers exist in relation to the simultaneous individual and collective unfolding of the text.

Further, “[p]ostmodern knowledge,” writes Jean-Francois Lyotard, “refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable.”<sup>12</sup> Lyotard studies the condition of knowledge and culture following transformations in postindustrial, Western society and explains how our ideas have changed, especially with the rise of computer and

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9 Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters, eds., *Autobiography and Postmodernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 3.

10 *Ibid.*, 8.

11 *Ibid.*, 7.

12 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxv.

other technological advancements. Instead of grand philosophical narratives that regulate and prescribe ethics and action, he believes that it is more relevant now to think about how we are contextualized by and perform within multiple smaller narratives and the various roles we play in our everyday lives. “A *self* does not amount to much,” he asserts, “but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before.”<sup>13</sup> *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* engages this concept in non/narrative form, connecting multiple and discrete stories in a kind of spatial relationality that also point to the effects of historical and cultural trauma.

Postmodernism might also be seen as a reflex contextualized by capitalism, according to Fredric Jameson, and in which consumption and commodification have saturated all aspects of contemporary life.<sup>14</sup> Jameson's “postmodern condition” delineates a number of symptoms including “historical deafness”<sup>15</sup>; the schizophrenia that marks an inability to “unify the past, present, and future of [...] biographical experience or psychic life” and through which we might encounter a “series of pure and unrelated presents in time”<sup>16</sup>; depthlessness, or the multiplication of surfaces which mark culture and experience as spatial instead of temporal<sup>17</sup>; and situations in which feeling is replaced by euphoric “intensities” as a result of the simultaneity of the spatial, instead of the movement of the temporal. At the core of Jameson's conception of the postmodern is the lack of temporality, which results in an inability to unify by way of historical understanding. Style and materiality of texts and of life dominate the contemporary, and it is through this depthless present that the past is read as an accumulation of commodifiable styles. The simultaneous “presents” mark a breakdown of temporality seen especially through the materiality of language and “meaning-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>14</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 12.

effects” of postmodern writing, and the loss of historicity leads to little more than surface-level kitsch like “pastiche” and “nostalgia,” averting any more thoughtful depth of reflection.

Almost as an argument against Jameson, Rankine has constructed a text that both theorizes and non/narratively exemplifies a deeper postmodern subjectivity. Read alongside Jameson’s summary of postmodern effects, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* is seen to redefine textual practice in a way that critiques contemporary culture and moves toward a potential for political action. This work questions the idea of the postmodern subject as simply reacting without agency. Although the subject is traumatized by her own loss of identity within contemporary culture, through the process of the text Rankine’s narrator brings readers in to participate in the potential for something beyond that trauma. This rests in the implicit focus on community which develops quietly from beginning to end alongside examples of loneliness and trauma.

Formally, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* appears as a series of simultaneous happenings that seem on the surface not to be connected. Instead of progression, one chapter falls alongside the next, moments or ideas reflect back and forth or stand alone, and images hypertextually link the text to their significance in the technologically-mediated world. Space is a topic of investigation as the narrator moves through the physical, psychic, and emotional events under scrutiny occur across various locations. For example, Rankine includes the murder of James Byrd, who was dragged behind a truck in Texas; Abner Louima’s assault and the shooting of Amadou Diallo in New York; the Museum of Emotions in London and the flower- and card-filled lawn in front of Buckingham Palace in memory of Princess Diana; and the World Trade Center site just after the buildings came down on 9/11.

The theme of death that fills *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* is immediate and always framed in the present tense as a situation or state of being, not as the end of a progression in time. In another example, a television interview transcribed by the narrator

shows how knowledge is formed from one moment to the text, making communication difficult:

Man: He is deceased?  
 Boy: He is dead to me.  
 Man: So he is not deceased?  
 Boy: I do not know.  
       He could be dead.  
 Man: Is he or is he not dead?  
 Boy: He's been dead to my life.  
 Man: Someone wrote in your file  
       that he is dead. Did you tell  
       someone that he is dead?  
 Boy: All right, he is dead.<sup>18</sup>

Lacking a common understanding, these two characters seem to be speaking simultaneously and communicating little between them, demonstrating how the text foregrounds gaps and events that can't be made sense of, leaving readers to fill in the story. Real and fictionalized characters function in solitary space — they are alone, lonely — as if constructed by but unable to participate in any larger social network. Other thematic elements include references to lost or lacking memory, such as the friend with Alzheimer's who writes on a message board, "THIS IS THE MOST MISERABLE IN MY LIFE," which the narrator connects to the voice of Joseph Brodsky "saying, *What's the point of forgetting it it's followed by dying.*"<sup>19</sup> The narrator then repeats these two phrases back to back in a continuous circulation that feels completely outside of time, and it resonates through the rest of the book. Throughout *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine emphasizes that which does not fit into hegemonic, totalizing narratives — the stories that have been left out, edited away, smoothed over. She directs our attention as readers to the lack of context for making sense of experiences that fall outside of

<sup>18</sup> Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



narrative myths of the American Dream. And she creates a genealogy of debris that exceeds the narratives of nationhood that her subjects have been ingesting throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Formal strategies are also used explore space and time and emphasize repetition in relation to the emotional effects of real world events. The text includes and theorizes fragments and simulacra of popular culture and contemporary life and gives readers, as subjects implicated in the construction of the (cultural) text, insight into the psychic, social, and historical causes and effects of trauma, suffering, and loneliness. This work is anything but what Jameson might call “historically deaf,” depthless, or without feeling. Instead, it moves trauma as a theme, like death, like loneliness, through the book. The characters suffer trauma in different ways, and viewers may be traumatized by the events witnessed, the events and the viewers all being subjects of American history. Many — in the book and as readers/viewers — have survived one violent event after another and remain haunted by the past as it continues to exist in the present.

History is temporal, and trauma happens when events and their effects recur in the mind over time. And as Cathy Caruth suggests, trauma can be a consequence of the original destructive event, and also mark the challenge of coming to terms with survival. “It is only in recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival,” Caruth asserts, “that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience.” Turning to Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, she explains that traumatic neurosis is “not the reaction to any horrible event but, rather, the peculiar, and perplexing experience of survival” and proposes that “at the heart of Freud’s rethinking of history [...] is the urgent and unsettling question what does it mean to survive?”<sup>20</sup> Ac-

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20 Cathy Caruth, “Violence and Time: Traumatic Survivals,” *Assemblage* 20 (April 1993): 24; Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 18: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Group Psychology and Other Works* (1920–1922), ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Vintage, 2001).

cording to Caruth, the pathology or neurosis is not in the original event but in the haunting repetition of the image or event that takes hold of the traumatized in different manifestations, and for which there may be no real understanding. One obviously traumatic event for the family and friends of victims and the wider, American public is 9/11, into which there is no real access, nor does it seem possible to represent. Alongside a photo of a pile of stretchers made of wood for transporting rescued victims or bodies from the Trade Center wreckage, Rankine writes, "[t]he language of description competes with the dead in the air."<sup>21</sup> This is another version of the question, what does it mean to survive? Or as Caruth explains, "contemporary trauma" involves "a crisis of truth" that "extends beyond the question of individual cure and asks how we in this era can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access."<sup>22</sup> Caruth says this is an impossible history because it cannot be entirely possessed but only possesses. And the literary text can work to translate experience into understanding, "as the narrative of a belated experience [...] attests to its endless impact on a life."<sup>23</sup> Following Lacan, Caruth suggests "a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival."<sup>24</sup>

Rankine recreates this trauma through the presentation of events that are separate from, yet intimately related to, subjective experience. The text asks us as viewers to consider how we are affected by the traumatic history repeated in the violent acts against Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo, for example; and instead of access to some kind of truth or ability to make sense of the events, the narrator explains, "instead, I get a sharp

21 Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 82.

22 Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 6.

23 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 7.

24 Ibid.

pain in my gut. [...] Not quite a caving in, just a feeling of bits of my inside twisting away from flesh in the form of a blow to the body. [...] Sometimes I look into someone's face and I must brace myself—the blow on its way.”<sup>25</sup> The experience is felt as physical pain, the weight of the history of violence against Black people haunting the present moment of watching Louima on television, of watching his photo in this text. And when Diallo's death is announced, “[a]ll the shots, all forty-one never add up, never become plural, and will not stay in the past.”<sup>26</sup> This is a story about the repetition of that violence, which is at the core of American history. When a Black man is shot forty-one times, we are all implicated in the history that has perpetuated and condoned the violence in the present moment. The past remains aggressively in the present, and the images won't fade until it becomes possible to articulate the horrific and move toward a different future.

The event that triggers the personal traumatic repetition at the center of this book is the story of the narrator's sister's family killed in a car accident. The personal and the cultural mingle and point to questions of action and inaction, personal agency, and the historical trauma that is sustained in the present. The narrator tells us, “in truth I can do nothing but see in the activity of her grief three people's death.”<sup>27</sup> Drawing on Freud, Caruth asks, “what it would mean for history to be understood as the history of trauma,”<sup>28</sup> and suggests

that such a history — individual or collective — bears with it the weight of a paradox: that external violence is felt most, not in its direct experience, but in the missing of this experience; that trauma is constituted not only by the destructive force of a violent event but by the very act of its survival. If we are to register the impact of violence we cannot, therefore,

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<sup>25</sup> Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 56.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Caruth, “Violence and Time,” 24.

locate it only in the destructive moment of the past, but in an ongoing survival that belongs to the future.<sup>29</sup>

For better or worse, survival is passed on. And in its repetition of the effects of that violence and of holding readers/viewers accountable to participate in the traumatic aftermath, Rankine's text also works as a means to understanding, or a horizon of hope, by way of our communal responsibility: *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. The writing of the text and the act of reading might be used as a tool of resistance to the repetition of history, toward a future of collective action and constructive possibility.

Define loneliness?

Yes.

It's what we can't do for each other.

What do we mean to each other?

What does a life mean?

Why are we here if not for each other?<sup>30</sup>

We are responsible for each other, Rankine's narrator argues. Loneliness is what happens when we refuse to make sense of tragedy or when we narrate it away. But if we instead recognize trauma by way of history and assert the potential for a different future, maybe we can more constructively work toward new kinds of social, collective action.

Another example of this kind of social responsibility lies in the story about a "13 yr old boy convicted of first degree murder for killing a six yr old girl." The narrator says, "[w]e hear on the television [...] I, or we, it hardly matters." The boy is convicted and "in this moment we are alone with the facts as he will be when he understands."<sup>31</sup> We, as viewers and as individuals in a society where something like this happens, within which this boy was abandoned long before he ever turned 13, are complicit.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>30</sup> Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 67.

We watch as he is sent to prison for life, and we participate in his fate.

But there may also be some hope for breaking the repetition of violent histories, in the basic relation between self and other, reader and text. The representation of violent events in the text might be both traumatic and cathartic. To break out of the cycle, we need to see it, recognize it, and then resist. Rankine references Myung Mi Kim, who “did say that the poem is really a responsibility to everyone in a social space. She did say it was okay to cramp, to clog, to fold over at the gut, to have to put hand to flesh, to have to hold the pain, and then to translate it here. She did say, in so many words, that what alerts, alters.”<sup>32</sup> The text is an alarm. It is up to readers to take action. Or, as Rankine’s narrator tells us, “I tried to fit language into the shape of usefulness. The world moves through words as if the bodies the words reflect did not exist.”<sup>33</sup> The text can be a point of mediation between experience and its resulting traumatic effects, and a point of engagement for imagining possibilities for the future, an alert and an alteration envisioning a different path forward.

*Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* presents a history in the present that is fragmented, depressing, and yet hopeful. If, after Paul Celan, the poem is similar to a handshake, Rankine writes, “the handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that — Here. I am here. This conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive.”<sup>34</sup> This is the kind of storytelling through which “the nation speaks its disjunctive narrative,”<sup>35</sup> and, as readers and viewers, we become witnesses, responsible for sharing counter-narratives that give language to silenced voices. Through writing and speaking, subjects might respond to totalizing, nationalist

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>35</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 311.

ideologies, create other means of identification, and work toward the communal handshaking that occurs when citizens are no longer existing in isolation but become, instead, a part of a collective process of re-narrating history. These counter-narratives might then also serve to dismantle and rebuild the very social, cultural, and narrative structures that create the conditions for identity and relationship.



III.

POSSIBILITY





Juliana Spahr's *The Transformation*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, and Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* can be read as models of representation for subjects and readers who don't identify according to dominant narrative expectations. Pointing to tensions between group identity and individual experience, the subjects of these texts bear witness to the problematic nature of Western, masculine, heteronormative narratives and speak to cultural and gendered experiences that exceed historically constructed textual and social norms. The narrators here generate new ways of using language and documenting history that interrogate and revise expectations for gender performance, sexual practice and desire, and narratives of ethnic and geographical situatedness. In these works, subjects are created and proceed through the subversion and perversion of narrative, demonstrating identity as process versus unified product.

Negotiating geographic and ethnic colonization and historical oppression, these textual subjects-in-process articulate non-normative, non/narrative experience, challenge binary structures, open space for greater subjective understanding, and create complex models for representing personal and political identity. The narrators emphasize the need for recognition and become speaking subjects who bear witnesses to the social-cultural conditions around them, and through strategies of re-contextualization, re-identification, and re-collection, they dismantle, rearrange, reconstruct, and create anew.

The challenges of identification, when there is little within colonizing narratives to identify with, are explored by subjects who are multiply positioned and who perform this multiplicity through language and textual innovation. The narrator-subjects of these texts don't fit into binary, ideological notions of gender, sexual practice, and historical/cultural experience; rather, each negotiate personal and collective identification, recognizing there is no stable self, no single discourse or perspective from which to speak. From queering heterosexual domestic relations, to visualizing fragmented and incoherent details of history, to transgressing culturally traditional narratives of gender performance, and to combating European colonial erasure with Indigenous-perspectives, each narrator comes to represent a specifically situated subject in the world while multiple and contradictory discourses are exemplified on the page.

In order to connect with oneself, and feel connected in the world, one must have something with which to identify. Diana Fuss explains that "identification is the detour through the other that defines a self,"<sup>1</sup> which might be understood as relations among subjects, or even between a subject's inner and outer psychic life. Like identity, identification remains flexible, and as Fuss points out, "this detour through the other follows no predetermined developmental path, nor does it travel outside history and culture. Identification names the entry of history and culture into the subject, a subject that must bear the traces of each and every encounter with the external world."<sup>2</sup> Particularly for marginalized subjects or those who try to exist outside of hegemonic cultural narratives, the ability to identify with others, or find discursive space within an amenable discourse, can be a matter of survival. Dominant narratives of separation and individuality that disregard processes and relationships can be negatively consequential for any subject since, "identification is, from the beginning, a question of *relation*, of self to other,

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1 Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.

2 *Ibid.*, 3.

subject to object, inside to outside.”<sup>3</sup> Spahr, Cha, Anzaldúa, and Long Soldier’s narrators seem implicitly aware of this kind of dynamic nature of identity as they work through their own processes of disavowing hegemonic norms and narratives and instead create new means, and new possibilities — through language, history, memory, geography, and the body — for personal and cultural identification.

Central to political action, even for Freud, Fuss writes, “there can be no politics without identification.”<sup>4</sup> Calling for new languages, enacting non/narrative means of representation, and seeking greater possibilities for personal, political, and cultural identification and future-building is politics in action. These texts offer just four material examples that might motivate further textual practice and social change. They use formal strategies to break through narratives that “naturalize” or silence (gendered, sexual, cultural/ethnic) experience. And they function within symbolic structures — of patriarchy, language, history — while simultaneously embodying Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic space of disruption, rupture, contradiction, and negativity, in order to imagine alternatives by way of embodied experience.

Butler tells us that we need to recognize “how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can become instituted [...] a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone.”<sup>5</sup> Troubling identity categories is one way of pushing against boundaries, of going beyond “norms” into other, potential spaces of action and being. For Butler this is not a choice, but a responsibility. Pushing past boundaries and exceeding norms are necessary political actions, imperative for instituting “new modes of reality” through which silenced subjects can become recognized. And

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 10.

5 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29.

beyond recognition, they become speaking subjects, witnesses to the detrimental effects of totalizing narratives, binary structures, and historical oppressions.

Recalling Friedman's spatial and geographical theory of identity as constructed through multiply positioned discourses further helps us consider opportunities for working through, between, and among gender, sexuality, identity, politics, class, race, culture, geography, and language.<sup>6</sup> And we can see how these function in non/narrative, autobiographical-style texts. Butler echoes this notion in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, explaining,

if we require that someone be [...] a coherent autobiographer, we may be preferring the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call the truth of the person, a truth that, to a certain degree [...] might well become more clear in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness — in enigmatic articulations that cannot easily be translated into narrative form.<sup>7</sup>

For the narrators in these texts, allowing interruption and openness help expose truths of real lives often missed in seamless narration. Though, "the purpose [...] is not to celebrate a certain notion of incoherence," Butler suggests, "but only to point out that our 'incoherence' establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us."<sup>8</sup> Practices for documenting incoherence and antithetical experience and foregrounding ways language can be used to increase recognizability for marginalized subjects can elevate the under-

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6 Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

7 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 64.

8 Ibid.

standing of relationality and lend toward greater possibilities for textual and cultural politics.

Each through their own historical and geographical displacements, Spahr, Cha, Anzaldúa, and Long Soldier's subjects advocate for the negotiation of subjective identification on new terms. As Kristeva writes, "[t]he text is a practice that could be compared to political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society."<sup>9</sup> Spahr constructs alternatives to mainstream heterosexual domestic relations. Cha re-frames fragmented and previously invisible details of history. Anzaldúa transgresses traditional narratives and re-writes them from a feminist perspective. And Long Soldier offers personal stories and re-narrates histories of Native genocide through a first-person narrator. These writers create subjects-in-process or "in formation" who move through the spaces of the text similarly to multiply situated subjects in the world, while the multiple and contradictory discourses of the world are enacted through the formal strategies on the page.

In response to the history of broken treaties, narrativization of relations between the us government and Native peoples, and the continuing dissemination of "narratives of the Vanishing Indian in order to maintain the myth of the inevitability of the Native's disappearance," Barker and Teiawa assert,

we refuse to disappear into those narratives. Indigenous peoples understand that there is no difference between the telling and the material. They understand how we all, in fact, live inside and through the narratives we tell and that the importance in telling stories is inseparable from the identity, community, and history they compose and the spiritual, economic and political realities on which they depend and which they subvert or preserve.<sup>10</sup>

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9 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 17.

10 Joane Barker and Theresia Teiawa, "Native InFormation," in *Reading Native American Women: Critical/Creative Representations*, ed. Inés Hernández-Avila (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005), 108.

Although in *WHEREAS*, Long Soldier, a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation, speaks for herself, the text embodies a voice for historically silenced subjects. The narrators of the texts in this section on “possibility” become witnesses to the limited nature of ideological narratives and the limiting effects of binary structures, and they serve as future-looking proponents of alternative practices. Pushing beyond textual subversion, the narrators both address and respond, in Oliver’s terms, giving them, and their readers, agency as a mandate to create change.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

“a sort of shimmering”:  
Juliana Spahr’s *The Transformation*

Juliana Spahr’s *The Transformation* is a work that acts as witness to postcolonial effects from the perspective of a white outsider in contemporary Hawai‘i and to myths of the exceptionalism of the US, especially after 9/11. The text also functions as a kind of anti-memoir in the ways it uses language to dismantle expected narrative structures and puts pressure on questions about history, sexuality, and identity. Central to the non/narrative telling is the use of third-person pronouns: instead of using: “I,” “we,” “she,” “he,” or “us,” the narrator uses only “they” and “them” in reference to themselves, and their two partners, and their existence as a triad. The narrative exploration of the unconventional domestic partnership, the outsider perspective on the history of colonization contextualized by the Hawai‘ian landscape, and the return to New York after Hawai‘i lead the narrator through many “transformations” over the course of the book. In a traditional memoir, the journey might be a more linear one of “self-discovery.” Here, the process is spatial and temporal, linguistic and excessive, drawing our attention as readers to the gaps and incoherencies that shine light on details otherwise left out of “seamless” narration.

In the early chapters of the book, through the use of dense prose and repetition of key words and phrases, the narrator obsesses over trying to make sense of living in a place in which



it becomes impossible to articulate that place. It becomes clear how the history of a place — one exploited, multiply colonized, and in an antagonistic relationship with its current colonizer and owner, the mainland us — affects the everyday life of those who live there. The narrator relies on literal and metaphorical descriptions of the rich, natural surroundings as a way to articulate anxieties, concerns, and a seeming inability to reason and speak coherently. In the second half of the book, the domestic partnership of three moves back to New York City, just before 9/11. The narrator continues to wrestle with cultural dislocation, how they are different, and how New York is different, after Hawai'i. Over the course of this book, the narrator works through a personal transformation which can be read as an extended analysis of self in relation to outer environment(s), or an individual in relation to social expectations as well as to collective concerns.

Rachel Zolf points out that Spahr is taking up questions explored in some of her books of poetry, namely, “a set of complex issues related to ongoing us colonization and exceptionalism” from the perspective of a “settler in Hawaii”<sup>1</sup> and an ongoing critique of the expansion of the “military-industrial complex”<sup>2</sup> in the us after 9/11. In a way, *The Transformation* might also be read as a way “to exhaustively experiment with her ideas and feelings about us hegemonic practices.”<sup>3</sup> And in *Everybody's Autonomy*, Zolf asserts, Spahr focuses “on questions of the *we* and the *they* and the *you* — key pronouns in all of Spahr's work — and on writer and reader and citizen responsibility, and on the wedge between ethics and politics, and on what we're complicit in, and what does that mean.”<sup>4</sup> The density of prose,

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1 Gen Rob, “Rachel Zolf on Juliana Spahr: The Transformation thinks wit(h)ness,” *Lemon Hound*, November 14, 2014, <https://lemonhound.com/2014/11/14/rachel-zolf-on-juliana-spahr-the-transformation-thinks-withness/>

2 Juliana Spahr, *The Transformation* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2007), 56, quoted in Rob, “Rachel Zolf on Juliana Spahr.”

3 Rob, “Rachel Zolf on Juliana Spahr.”

4 Ibid.

and the repetition of long and complex phrasing and other language practices in *The Transformation*, serve as exploration through these kinds of questions, and the writing itself becomes a process for thinking and of witnessing. This also elicits Oliver's claim that in the act of witnessing is a responsibility implicit in our interrelations with one another, and especially across or because of our differences.<sup>5</sup>

Spahr begins *The Transformation* reflecting on the intimate relationship between the natural environment and human society, and considers the power of naming, categorization, and the ways language is used to control or define natural and social phenomena. The literal and figurative weave descriptively together, for example, when the narrator explains, "[f]lora and fauna grow next to and around each other without names. Humans add the annotation. They catalogue the flora and fauna, divide them up, chart their connections and variations, eventually name them, and as they do this they read into them their own stories."<sup>6</sup> Hawai'ian history is filled with complex entanglements between colonizers and colonized, Native and other. Using the example of the "huehue haole," a term used for white outsiders, the narrator says, "[w]hat was called the maracuja, the passiflora, the passionflower, they called the huehue haole. Huehue is the name of a climber native to the islands. Haole is the word that is used to describe some of them in this story, people who arrive from somewhere else. In the world of plants it is also used to describe a particularly noxious and invasive species."<sup>7</sup> If so much of Hawai'ian culture is articulated through the vegetation, environment, and landscapes, Spahr's narrator understands that, in order to tell their story, it would have to be considered in relation to the surrounding material and metaphorical natural elements. "This is a story of the passiflora and the tree canopy," the narrator explains. "This is a story of three

5 Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

6 Spahr, *The Transformation*, 13.

7 Ibid., 13–14.

who moved to an island in the middle of the Pacific together.”<sup>8</sup> The story must be told from within the Hawai’ian landscape, the external physical and cultural space of an internal narrative journey.

The narrator, as a subject-in-process, often reflects on the personal and political, domestic and public space in the form of repeated phrasing and sentence constructions that write “around” meaning. This strategy performs the inadequacy of language to provide articulate explanations for understanding self in relation to other. While the three who move to the island together are individually and collectively referred to as “they,” it is made clear that the triad conforms to heterosexual practices of sexual relations. Nonetheless, the gender-neutral or multiple-referencing “they” troubles the construct of heterosexual domestic partnership.

The story that unfolds weaves descriptions of natural phenomena with an inability to narrate a non-conforming relationship within the context of social norms. Early on, the narrator illustrates this, explaining,

[t]he minute they got off the plane they realized that the beauty of the island was its own radiant thing full of boths and that they had to begin with these boths. It was an island of both great environmental beauty and of great environmental destruction. And these boths fed each other in a complicated feedback loop. [...] When they looked around most of what they saw among the many things growing, flying, and crawling had been brought onto the island after the whaling ships arrived. It told a story of beauty and a story of mismanagement. It told a story of invasion and of acceptance as if it could tell both of these stories using the same vocabulary.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Ibid., 14.

9 Ibid., 27.

Central to telling and understanding the stories is the difficulty of language. How can one exist in binary oppositions simultaneously? How can a place be so beautiful and suffer such violence and destruction? The narrator sees the paradox, and the sadness, of a place with such a layered identity, a place that has been exploited for so long by so many and yet still contains such beauty. Language can also be deceptive in the assumption of its stability, or the expectation that it can be used to articulate opposing ideas. Although Spahr's narrator uses the word "both," that is also somewhat misleading since each side of the binary is something so complex it can't be reduced. And central to *The Transformation* is the undoing of binary structures. There are never only two sides but a history of multifaceted issues that cannot be neatly separated. The narrator attempts to find language to clarify the questions and analysis, for example, explaining,

despite the expansionist language and all its tools, all the laws and all the imperialism, all the economic dominance, all the military might, all the technologies, and all the entertainments, the language politics of the island remained endlessly complicated. The expansion did not happen overnight and one could point to how the local languages and the languages that were often created by the arrival of the expansionist language to someplace new, the pidgins and creoles, the burrowing languages, the negotiated languages, refused to go away as evidence of how the expansionist language might not be as good at expansion as one might think.<sup>10</sup>

Language controls and refuses to give in to control. The history of the uses and mingling of languages in Hawai'i reflect the long-term and complex cultural history of domination and resistance. Spahr dramatizes this through the repetition of lists, like above. The different kinds of languages represent the layers of history, and this list repeats throughout the chapter with

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 95.

sometimes slight variation. The narrator doesn't simply explain the dynamics of linguistic and cultural imperialism and defiance but rather uses a density of language to reflect on examples themselves dense in their assemblage, and that show how languages and politics of resistance complicate seamless narratives of expansion and control. Spahr seems to be asking what kinds of vocabularies can account for such beauty and destruction, and if language can really be used at all to articulate such histories of colonization. If it is possible, any language of articulation has to somehow include these multiplicities.

Putting pressure on oppositional structures, Spahr uses the concept of the triad as a model that challenges and resists binary constructions. There is no easy language to explain a sexual and domestic union of three people. In a triad, issues cannot simply be reduced to those between self and other, or gender limited to he and she. The triad makes the binary impossible and requires new means of articulation and recognition. It works as a literal example of the difficulty of falling outside dominant forms of categorization and recognizability and as a metaphor for breaking out of socially instituted expectations for gender, sexuality, and identification. The triad also moves away from a basic self-other structure and into a more circular constellation of elements. The practical nature of the domestic triad also might suggest that if history and politics could be more often understood in terms of constellations instead of limited by binaries wherein one must choose one side or the other, this could create greater possibilities for understanding real lived experiences. The triad calls attention to problematic narratives that create false choices and limited means of identification, and those that potentially even inhibit political engagement.

The domestic triad can also be read as an example of non-normatively heterosexual, perverse desire. In Theresa de Lauretis's terms, negative associations with perversion and desire are turned around entirely and understood as positive and pro-

ductive.<sup>11</sup> Spahr's trio finds that there are no "acceptable" social models for such a partnership of three. The narrator offers the example of receiving social invitations that include a partner and then having to ask about bringing two partners. It becomes a queer construction in which the three are inevitably in perverse relation to one another and in which non-normative, heterosexual, and homosocial elements mingle and fuse into a singular domestic entity — though the extent of the desiring relationship between the two men is never entirely clarified. When one "chooses" to turn away from social norms, the process can be that much more difficult without something else with which to identify. If "perversion" is seen as a turning away from "a socially constituted norm" and not a refusal of nature, then this norm, or "normal sexuality," can be understood as "a requirement of social *reproduction*, both reproduction of the species and reproduction of the social system."<sup>12</sup> Read in this way, the triad might be considered a perverse response to expectations for heterosexual domestic partnerships and a model for alternative practices, especially for those who are not willing or able to conform to the "norms" of social reproduction.

When the narrator and the partners move back to New York, to the "islands in the Atlantic," they suggest that it may be an opportunity for relief from the difficulty of living an unconventional domestic lifestyle. Optimistically, the narrator explains,

[t]he gray matter at the back of their brain told them to move to the islands in the Atlantic because the islands were known for their perversions and various sexualities and they wanted to live someplace known for its perversions and various sexualities. The gray matter at the back of the brain wanted to move to the place that self-identified as a place of complicated sexuality, a place for people who liked to be getting in and out of various beds in various different ways. A place that

11 Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

12 *Ibid.*, 113.

celebrated different beds and different ways of bedding down and around. The islands in the Atlantic, were full of perversions of all sorts and the stories told about the people of the islands had all genders in all the different combinations, even the ones beyond the two that so defined their culture at this moment.<sup>13</sup>

Although New York at first appears to be a place full of “perversions,” a place of “complicated sexuality” where they will feel more comfortable, eventually they find that there are still very few, if any, models that match their own. In effect this new place becomes no more affirming for them in their non-normative, romantic identifications. They are not a threesome in an expected way, and they are not self-identified as queer. Instead, they have a specific schedule and heterosexual lifestyle that entails that one woman alternate sleeping with two different men — whose specific relations with each other is undetermined — and as a platonic trio they function as a domestic partnership of three. Here collective identification falls short or requires more complex thinking through. The sentiment echoes earlier reflections on the tensions between historical colonization and Native collectivity in Hawai‘i, where neither story can be summarized in simple terms. Spahr is careful, however, not to create parallels between incommensurate histories or circumstances but to instead offer specific examples of personal, political, and collective concerns that become limited by the norms of social and narrative expectations.

Back in New York, the three witness the fall of the World Trade Center on 9/11 from across the river. Eventually, they again become involved in poetry readings and social gatherings as a way of dealing with the various kinds of trauma. According to the narrator, after “the buildings fell,” things became both more meaningful and more difficult to interpret and understand. Conversations became “deeper” and more “resonant [...] as if they were shaping their lives.” The narrator continues,

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13 Spahr, *The Transformation*, 123.

[t]hey felt that life was good as long as they could talk about the lyrics to Brandy and had a relationship with other people who also knew the lyrics to Brandy and had a relationship to them that was like theirs, that abandoned irony in the pursuit of all-out sentiment. The readings and the gatherings were a sort of ephemera that rose up when the buildings fell. They were a place to feel safe, to feel as if it were fine to be a pervert because they were with other perverts, those who identified as queer or not, the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians and the ACLU and the People for the American Way.<sup>14</sup>

The narrator refers to comments made by Jerry Falwell who after 9/11 blamed "the feminists and gays," liberals, and others, for helping cause such devastation. Outside of this grotesque version of American patriotism, Spahr offers an example of the need for communal identification as a politics as well as a means of survival. Having others with whom to identify can offer a safe place, a place in which what is seen negatively by dominant culture as perversion functions instead in supportive terms. The social gatherings become a constructive space for those who don't identify with the conservative "norms" of citizenship articulated in the wake of 9/11, and that reiterate the struggle for individual and group identification that is antithetical to dominant oppressive narratives of American exceptionalism.

Further coming to terms with the perversity of the triad's domestic situation in the context of the larger culture, toward the end of *The Transformation*, Spahr's narrator strategically references Sappho's poem, "He is More Than a Hero." In the poem there is a pair of lovers and an other, the narrator, who seems to be in love with one of the pair, thus forming a love triangle, and Spahr's narrator uses the poem to reflect the awkward structure of the three lovers in the book:

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14 Ibid., 187.



At that moment, they had agreed to a third point, a Sapphic point. [...] They agreed to no longer see relationship as a feedback loop of face-to-face desire. Instead they had to deal with a sort of shimmering, a fracturing of all their looks and glances. And it was because of this third Sapphic point that they implicated themselves in they.<sup>15</sup>

The Sappho reference further perverts the conceit of heterosexual pairing and sexual-object choice. By replacing the binary with a triad structure it thereby opens the field for other ways of being, and offers the narrator a point of identification. It is at this moment that the narrator comes to fully embrace “they” not as a unified subjectivity but “as a sort of shimmering, a fracturing,” as something that is awkward but also claimed as their own. The affirming perversity of *The Transformation* lies in its non/narrative undoing of expectations and results in a troubling that invites further attempts to articulate layered subjectivity and collectivity. The linguistic anxieties and awkwardness become beautiful and shimmering, the personal-political carving out one path, among many possible future paths, of transformation.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 206.

## Speaking across History, Geography, and Image: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* is memoir as the site of the impossibility of memorializing. While past impressions and artifacts are collected in the text, materials come together and separate, weave and unweave themselves into a space that is outside of the various temporalities referenced. *Dictée* is a retrospective constellation of materials that, through its accumulation of the messy details of history, refuses the idea that a subject is a unified self who gathers and then documents her memories into a coherent personal narrative. In writing on *Dictée*, Anne Cheng asks how a text can be read "as a 'multicultural, feminist, post-colonial and ethnic memoir' when its process of *recollection* continually stalls and refuses identification even on the simplest level?" Since, she continues, this text speaks "through disembodied yet multiple voices, borrowed citations, and captionless photographs, this supposed autobiography gives us a confession that does not confess, a dictation without origin, and history without names."<sup>1</sup> As readers, we may expect an autobiography to straightforwardly tell us a story about its subject; in its nar-

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, "Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's 'Dictée,'" *MELUS* 23, no. 4 (December 1998): 119.

rator, we imagine a character we relate to. As an “ethnic memoir” maybe we believe it should define something about ethnic identity that we can then add to our wheelhouses of simple and explanatory narratives. We want it to “make sense.” *Dictée* instead challenges us to consider what and how a personal story comes to be. It performs layered and disparate “multicultural, feminist” content through genre-bending poetry, prose, images, and other material across its pages. Cheng further explains that “in *Dictée*, acts of recollection (in the sense of memory recall) are frequently indistinguishable from acts of collection (in the sense of gathering bits of objects).”<sup>2</sup> References and artifacts are treated as personal and cultural evidence and include the narrator’s presentation and parody of French lessons and dictation, the personal diary writing of Cha’s mother, and images of Korean protests, violence, and revolutionary acts in the face of Japanese occupation. Historical documentation mingles with family history, personal reflection, and exploration of identity. Like a scrapbook, images and fragments are pasted together forming constellations within larger histories, single moments representing the past in the instant of the (present) text.<sup>3</sup>

2 Cheng, “Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire,” 119.

3 Much has been written about *Dictée*. For a detailed survey of recent criticism, see Flore Chevallier, “Erotics and Corporeality in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” in *Transnationalism and Resistance: Experience and Experiment in Women’s Writing*, eds. Adele Parker and Stephanie Young (New York: Rodopi, 2013), 21–43. For further reading, see: Constance Lewallen, ed., *The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Karina Eileras, *Between Image and Identity: Transnational Fantasy, Symbolic Violence, and Feminist Misrecognition* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007); Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón, eds., *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey, eds., *Representing Lives: Women and Auto/Biography* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000); Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue, eds., *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women’s Writing and Performance Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Josephine Nock-Hee Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics*

Cha was born and lived in Korea for a few years as a child, and then grew up and lived in San Francisco, Berkeley, and, for a short time as an adult, Paris to study film. Later, visiting Korea “in the midst of massive student demonstrations,” she felt like a stranger to her own home.<sup>4</sup> In her chapter on “Diasporic Modernisms,” Friedman writes about the connection between traumatic diasporic experience and creative practice. A “personally felt experience of communal exile,” she suggests, “simultaneously includes the sense of being cut off from the past and past home/lands and the necessity to forge new, often imaginary home/lands for the future. Consequently, memory and creativity are constitutive dimensions of diasporic modernities.”<sup>5</sup> Through aesthetic practice and formal innovation, Cha captures how “diasporas reflect dislocation of both space and time — material movements that signal the far more profound psychological effects of displacement, often incorporating both the dystopic and utopic tendencies of modernity.”<sup>6</sup> Reading *Dictée* and other texts through historically widened, global modernisms, Friedman explains that “modernity in all its different and recurrent articulations typically combines the violence of dislocation and the regeneration of relocation, the despair of loss and the exhilaration of new agencies.”<sup>7</sup> A writer like Cha might also be read as utilizing or creating a “third geography,” an alternative “space of memory, of language, of translation”; in short, “a terrain of writing.”<sup>8</sup> Further, the search for memory or writing

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(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Deborah M. Mix, *A Vocabulary of Thinking: Gertrude Stein and Contemporary North American Women's Innovative Writing* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007); Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), among others.

4 Susan Stanford Friedman, “Diasporic Modernisms,” in *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time, Modernist Latitudes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 288.

5 Ibid., 284.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 285.

8 Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 15, quoted in Friedman, “Diasporic Modernisms,” 286.

toward home “is neither the actual geographical entity of Korea nor an idealized Korean homeland.”<sup>9</sup> It makes sense that in this context of global diasporic modernism spanning time and place that home, instead, “functions as the imagined ‘destination’ of perpetual search [...] an imaginary home beyond a single place or history or tradition, but it is also a home with the specificities of many times, many places.”<sup>10</sup> I also think that the function of “home” for Cha more specifically extends both inward and outward, acting as a vehicle or means of a personal-textual journey through subjective processing and identity formation. Home is an intimate part of her understanding of identity, and the hybrid and multilayered processes are key to that understanding.

This non/narrative, non/memoir begins, even before the book begins, with a grainy image of the writing of a Korean exile on the wall of a Japanese mine. Translated, it reads, “mother/I miss you/I am hungry/I want to go home to my native place.”<sup>11</sup> Korea was occupied by Japan from 1909 to 1945, and the history and emotion of this runs through *Dictée*. This first image in a way acts as a narrative framing device when read with the final imagistic piece of written text in the book, which begins, “[I] lift me up mom to the window the child looking above too high above her view.” The narrator comments on the difficulty of vision, of looking out beyond one’s own capability or perspective. The seemingly incongruent sections throughout the book we come to see more clearly as the stories of the mother and other historical female figures who constitute the understanding of the child. The narrator continually negotiates her own writing and experience through the stories of these women and the fragments and effects of history.

Lift me up mom to the window the child looking above too high above her view the glass between [...]. Lift me up to the window the white frame and the glass between, early dusk

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9 Friedman, “Diasporic Modernisms,” 290.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 297.

or dawn when light is muted, lines yield to shades, houses cast shadow pools in the passing light. [...] Trees adhere to silence in attendance to the view to come. If to occur. In vigilance of lifting the immobile silence. Lift me to the window to the picture image unleash the ropes tied to weights of stones first the ropes then its scraping on wood to break stillness as the bells fall peal follow the sound of ropes holding weight scraping on wood to break stillness bells fall a peal to sky.<sup>12</sup>

Cha ends *Dictée* with an act of lifting and breaking through the silence, “as the bells fall peal follow the sound of ropes holding weight scraping on wood to break stillness bells fall a peal to sky.” Falling bells, one can imagine, are noisy. “Peal”: a loud burst of noise. The ringing turns into the sound of the movement of “weight scraping on wood” and breaks the stillness and silence of letting history go untold. In this account, “bells fall” and ring out, and they appeal, the sounds ringing and resonating to end a text that remains open. In contrast to the quiet artifact of writing on the wall that opens *Dictée*, this final noisy presence is a voiced response. The material text holds the accumulation of details, the pieces of narratives and images, formed by the subject-in-process narrator. These are the materials of formation, the accumulation and collage like the subjective process of coming to understand and identify, to become a voice of history and not just an entity constituted by its effects.

*Dictée* is organized into nine sections, each named for one of the Greek muses — Clio, Calliope, Urania, Melpomene (“whose name means *memory* in Greek”<sup>13</sup>), Erato, Elitere, Thalia, Terpsichore, Polymnia — which contributes to the “mythology” she constructs for “subjects marred by unspeakable loss — silence, exile, or death.”<sup>14</sup> Friedman points to the women forming the

12 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1995), 179.

13 Friedman, “Diasporic Modernisms,” 297.

14 Elizabeth A. Frost, “‘In Another Tongue’: Body, Image, Text in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s ‘Dictée,’” in *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women’s Writing and Performance Poetics*, eds. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 182.

structural apparatus of *Dictée* beyond their use as a simple organizing strategy:

the woman's body figures as the geo-body of the nation — violated by invasion, driven into exile [...] torn apart as one sector of society is set upon another under dictatorship, teetering between muteness and fragmentary speech. Cha narrates the twentieth-century history of Korea allegorically, by focusing on its women, specifically the revolutionary martyr Yu Guan Soon (1903–1920) and then her own mother, and by imagining the nation as a motherland split in two, “She” and “HER.” “Clio History” features Yu Guan Soon as Korea’s Jeanne d’Arc, the only daughter in a family of sons and the one who led a massive rebellion against the Japanese occupation in 1919.<sup>15</sup>

Language, history, and writing in *Dictée* are also intimately connected to speech and the body. Cha creates play between language and speech, silence and voice, words and the physical phenomenon of speaking (or being unable to speak). Frost writes that Cha “provokes through verbal and visual means an inquiry into the nature of cultural identity and corporality.” For example, in one section Cha includes diagrams of the parts of the body used in speaking, swallowing, and breathing, from the mouth down the neck and into the lungs. This focus on the “corporeal suggests that text and image are tools to render the body intelligible.”<sup>16</sup> The need to collect and compile is key to the articulation of the subject, to recognition of the body in terms of the history of resistance in Korea, and for moving through space and language to document the lives of women who have gone before. The textual document revises, or sees again, that history.

The subject at the heart of *Dictée* gives language to unspoken history and those silenced who, through the text, can testify to

15 Cha, *Dictée*, 24–31, quoted in Friedman, “Diasporic Modernisms,” 303.

16 Elizabeth A. Frost, “In Another Tongue,” 181–82.

the events of the past as a means of being in the present. Cha writes,

*Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in Time's memory. Unemployed. Unspoken. History. Past. Let the one who is diseuse, one who is mother who waits nine days and nine nights be found. Restore memory. Let the one who is diseuse, one who is daughter restore spring with her each appearance from beneath the earth. The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it stops writing at all.*<sup>17</sup>

From the French, “to say,” *diseuse* refers to one who speaks well, the one who, because of her skill, will “restore memory,” recover it from disuse and death. The mother is found and given the ability to speak in the text; and the daughter writes to restore what has been buried, to tell everything, until the ink runs out. The narrator-daughter needs to tell the story of the mother, the mother’s history, and come to terms with her own story. She needs to write it all out, even if the story is still incomplete, constructed in stops and starts, in fragments and images and across genres. It’s an embodied articulation of identity as constellation. The visual and linguistic noise breaks the silence, fills gaps with stories. Or, as Frost writes,

Cha combines divergent modes of representation: visual images [...] alternate with passages of English, French, Latin, and Chinese. Hand-written passages and calligraphic ideograms large enough to fill a page blur the lines between the discursive and the imagistic. Cha evokes multiple discourses and their accompanying conventions: lyric and epic poetry, parable, translation, correspondence, catechism, historical narrative, cinematic prose.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Cha, *Dictée*, 133.

<sup>18</sup> Frost, “In Another Tongue,” 181.



The relationships between hybrid elements of the text constellate between the covers of this book, opening into a world that redefines what it means to record history and narrate experience from an otherwise silenced subjective perspective.

At times, Cha offers meta-commentary on the complex nature of hybridity. The following selection is one part of a longer piece, "Aller," which is followed by "Retour." The idea of going and returning is recursive, not unlike the unburying of history or the writing of memory or past events. *Dictée* is in continual process of going into history to recover material, and coming back out to record, revise, re-articulate. This becomes not simply an endeavor, but a responsibility; the one who has the skill for speaking is the one called upon to act as witness, the one to write it all down.

Forgetting nothing  
 Leaving out nothing.  
 [...]  
 Resurrect it all over again.  
 Bit by bit. Reconstructing step by step  
 step  
 within limits  
 [...]  
 resurrect, as much as  
 possible, possibly could hold  
 possibly ever hold  
 a segment of it  
 segment by segment  
 [...]  
 secrete saliva the words  
 saliva secrete the words  
 secretion of words flow liquid form  
 salivate the words  
 give light. Fuel. Enflame.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cha, *Dictée*, 129.

There is a sense of necessity—to speak, to (re)write history—but there are no overarching narratives and few contextualizing devices to help the reader through the collected materials. The personal merges with official and other histories, and all of this runs through the hand of the narrator as documentary subject. Similarly, Carol Jacobs interprets Benjamin's theory of memory or documenting the past “in which the past must and must not be told—neither as conventional flowing narrative, nor, certainly, as report, but as epic and rhapsody, literary forms that mark their own ruptures.”<sup>20</sup> If the past is to be told as “epic and rhapsody,” then maybe there is, in Benjamin's terms, not necessarily a thing called autobiographical writing but only writing that seeks to uncover the past in its layers and ruptures. Cha writes, “Forgetting nothing / Leaving out nothing. / But pretend.” It is always a necessary (re)construction in which one can only “resurrect as much as possible [...] segment by segment / sequence, narrative, variation.” In the simultaneous uncovering and rewriting of memory, details of the past become more visible and are given voice in their constellated messiness even as they are contained by the text (“within limits”), through language. The text that rewrites history is a political practice that exposes what has previously been secret or untold, and which can lead to action: “give light. Fuel. Enflame.”<sup>21</sup>

Acting as witness, Cha's narrator becomes the speaking subject, giving voice to the silenced. Witnessing, according to Kelly Oliver, is key to a politics that goes beyond recognition and gives subjects the ability to be addressed and to respond in documenting the truths of history. Oliver tells the story of a Holocaust testimonial given by an eyewitness who describes the “Auschwitz uprising in which prisoners set fire to the camp.” The witness reported seeing four chimneys on fire when in actuality

20 Carol Jacobs, “Walter Benjamin: Topographically Speaking,” in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, ed. David S. Ferris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 108.

21 Cha, *Dictée*, 129.

there was only one chimney, and as Oliver explains, the discrepancy points to something especially important:

The Auschwitz survivor saw something unfamiliar, Jewish resistance, which gave her the courage to resist. She saw something that in one sense did not happen — four chimneys blowing up — but that in another made all the difference to what happened. Seeing the impossible — what did not happen — gave her the strength to make what seemed impossible possible: surviving the Holocaust.<sup>22</sup>

The witness reads possibility into her account, and although the account she reports does not match the facts regarding the chimneys, it lends itself to a historical truth that is outside of the particular details. While before this event there was little hope of Jewish resistance and survival, this witness reframes that thinking to include hope — opening a space for the possibility of resistance and survival — within her testimony. As witness she participates in political action, helping to create other ways of conceptualizing and constructing narrated history and present lived experience with the hope of a different future.

Oliver argues that witnessing necessitates “response-ability,” the ability to respond, which one cannot do when one is merely recognized but cannot speak. To be a witness is to be given the ability — in fact the responsibility — to respond to others and events. Further, “address-ability,” according to Oliver, requires being considered a subject with agency to be addressed and to respond. This notion goes beyond Hegelian theories of subject recognition, which Oliver sees as antagonistic in structure and limited to being submissively recognized by another or recognizing oneself in another. While being recognized, and not mis-recognized or made invisible, is important especially for historically marginalized subjects, Oliver asserts that we have to also consider voice and agency in more complex terms:

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22 Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 1.

Through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects [...] the speaking subject is a subject by virtue of address-ability and response-ability. Address-ability and response-ability are the roots of subjectivity, which are damaged by the objectifying operations of oppression and subordination.<sup>23</sup>

During the Japanese occupation of Korea it was illegal for citizens to speak Korean, making it difficult, if not impossible, to speak at all. That Koreans were unable to access their own language during that time, for Cha, entailed silence and oppression but also resistance. In reconstructing that history, both visual and aural aspects of language are essential to her account. What the page looks like is as important as how the language sounds or what it means. Cha situates visual representation, written language, and speech in fundamental, intimate relation in the witnessing of past events made present. Cha's narrator, as textual witness, reconstructs fragments into a testimony that articulates history on behalf of those subjects, in some ways similar to other kinds of testimonials described by Oliver, explaining,

testimonies from the aftermath of the Holocaust and slavery do not merely articulate a demand to be recognized or to be seen. [...] They are also testifying to the process of witnessing that both reconstructs damaged subjectivity and constitutes the heart of all subjectivity. [...] The demand for recognition manifest in testimonies from those othered by dominant culture is transformed by the accompanying demands for retribution and compassion.<sup>24</sup>

Further, "compassionate relations" between subjects can manifest by way of processes of "working-through whatever we

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 8.

might find threatening in relation to otherness and difference.”<sup>25</sup> Cohesive narrative that privileges victors’ voices can sometimes be read as maintaining power and status quo, those victors threatened by “other” voices calling for agency and the ability to respond. In *Dictée*, the narrator witnesses the oppression of the Korean people while cultural and personal histories transform into a testimonial document that speaks.

The process of the construction of the text negotiates what, and how, “to say.” A kind of working through that might function, in Oliver’s terms, as a “social theory of transformation” in which it becomes “necessary to reconceive of subjective identity in a way that does not require abjecting or excluding others or otherness in order to have a sense of oneself as a subject.”<sup>26</sup> Compiling, juxtaposing, and articulating the traumatic details of history functions as a way for Cha’s narrator to reconceive of subjective identity, to come to terms with history on behalf of family and the other historical characters of the text, and to bring that into the (revised) present. As Oliver tells us, “none of us develops a sense of ourselves as subjects with any sort of identity apart from relations with others,” and witnessing becomes not simply a project of individual identity but an “ethical and political responsibility.”<sup>27</sup> And language and writing are central to the (re)construction of history and relationships in the present and future. Just before *Dictée* ends, we read,

[w]ords cast each by each to weather  
 avowed indisputably, to time.  
 If it should impress, make fossil trace of word,  
 residue of word, stand as a ruin stands,  
 simply, as mark  
 having relinquished itself to time to distance<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 10–11.

<sup>28</sup> Cha, *Dictée*, 177.

The words on the page become witness and might stand the test of time even if only as mere fossils or residue that “mark” history, and that resonate over time and distance.

For Oliver, to “conceive of subjectivity as a process of witnessing” necessitates the ability to speak and to exist “in relation to other people, especially through difference” and to “realize an ethical and social responsibility to those others who sustain us.”<sup>29</sup> The witness to history, and the document that gives voice to the previously silenced, enact models of political and social transformation for individual and collective identity. As the formal hybridity of *Dictée* offers a constellation of stories, experiences, sentiments, languages, and histories on the page, the narrator performs a transformation from silence to speech, from obscurity to discernibility, from hope passed from mother (tongue, -land) to daughter (one who is skilled at speaking), so that future generations can look up and out the window toward other horizons.

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29 Oliver, *Witnessing*, 19.



## The Borderlands as Process and Possibility: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*

This is my home  
this thin edge of  
Barbwire.

[...]

This land was Mexican once,  
was Indian always  
and is.

And will be again.

— Gloria Anzaldúa<sup>1</sup>

At the center of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* is the reading, undoing, and re-claiming of traditional stories and cultural myths on which Anzaldúa was raised growing up on the border of Texas and Mexico with Indigenous and Mexican heritage. Anzaldúa locates herself in the literal and figurative borderlands as a subject-in-process of re-formation: dismantling layers of historical narratives, icons, gender regulations, and languages to arrive at a new consciousness that is both per-

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd edn. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 25.



sonal and political. The text also theorizes from a feminist perspective and queers binary and hierarchal constructions of gender and sexuality. Anzaldúa identifies as a lesbian and as queer in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, but queerness is also enacted in the formal choices and non/narrative structures of the text itself, the content only part of the form showing “the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with [gender and sexuality] and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses,”<sup>2</sup> as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes. Although the long hybrid essay, “Atravesando Fronteras / Crossing Borders,” which makes up the first half of the book, can be seen as performing the move from *loquería* (“the crazies”), as Anzaldúa writes, to power, agency and voice, it is not a linearly narrative progression. She explains:

For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. [...] Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, *I made the choice to be queer*. It’s an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts. It makes for *loquería*, the crazies.<sup>3</sup>

Each section of “Atravesando Fronteras / Crossing Borders” focuses on different aspects of history, religious and cultural identity, gender and sexuality, language, and topics that seem to transcend or add additional layers to those, such as “Entering the Serpent” and “La herencia de Coatlique / The Coatlique state.” Throughout, memories mix with traditional stories and characters, language changes from English to different dialects of Spanish, and Nahuatl words are woven through. Sometimes the prose is in a kind of straightforward, essay form and other times is more like a stream-of-conscious, poetic meditation.

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2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

3 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 41.

The constellation of ideas and textual practices helps readers to imagine emotionally and relate viscerally to the pain, confusion, and feelings of invisibility and to transcend the limitations on self-worth that Anzaldúa scrutinizes. The personal is political and theoretical in this work in the ways it offers alternative textual practices, processes, and means for identification. The subject of the text negotiates form and language on the page, constructs a process for articulating the disparate, and ultimately offers an alternative model of subjective agency.

The layers and shifting registers in "Atravesando Fronteras / Crossing Borders" further follow Friedman's spatialized conceptualization of the "geographics of identity,"<sup>4</sup> which Anzaldúa interrogates, explores, and performs by way of a narrator situated and shifting among languages, histories, landscapes, cultural narratives, and gender expectations. Conceptualizing the actual and textual borderlands as process is also a way of rereading the past through the present and toward new narratives that represent real, lived experience in the world. As Sonia Saldívar-Hull writes,

[b]y rewriting the stories of Malinali, la Llorona and the Virgen de Guadalupe, Anzaldúa is strategically reclaiming a ground for female historical presence. [...] The New Mestiza narrates the pre-Cortesian history of these deities, and shows how they were devalued by both the Azteca-Mexica patriarchs and by the Christian conquerors.<sup>5</sup>

Further, Saldívar-Hull explains that Anzaldúa's critique "consciously ruptures the male Chicano romanticization of a vague utopian indigenous past."<sup>6</sup> Anzaldúa deconstructs traditional beliefs that are central to what she has come to know as her racial and cultural lineage and her experience growing

4 Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

5 Sonia Saldívar-Hull, "Introduction," in Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 6.

6 Ibid.

up in a borderland community that taught her who and how to be. And she ultimately creates a *mestiza* (“mixed”) identity, asserting, “[w]hat I want is an accounting with all three cultures — white, Mexican, Indian. [...] And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture — *una cultura mestiza* — with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar, and my own feminist architecture.”<sup>7</sup> She is literally and figuratively (re)constructing this geographical, historical, and contemporary identity, rewriting narratives as a means of survival.

In the section, “The Homeland, Aztlán / el otro México” Anzaldúa offers a brief history of the “Americas” from “ancient Indian ancestors [...] dated to 35000 B.C.” in Texas, to the migration of the Cochise people in 1000 BCE “into what is now Mexico and Central America,” to the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest and genocide of millions of Indigenous peoples.<sup>8</sup> She spends time weaving personal family stories with the geographical, political, and often violent histories of Mexico and the us southwest. And in later sections, she weaves narrative details of Indigeneity into her stories as a way of reclaiming and piecing together elements of personal and cultural identity that have been lost or radically changed. For example, she explains, “[m]y Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman’s history of resistance,” and later, “[n]ot me sold out my people but they me. *Malinali Tenepat* or *Malintzín*, has become known as *la Chingada* — the fucked one. [...] The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer.”<sup>9</sup> Although Anzaldúa writes from a specifically personal and intersectional situatedness, this work also helps us as readers to think deeply about cultural hybridity and the complex network of identifications within which subjects who multiply-identify exist. Or as Domino Renee Pérez explains,

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7 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 44.

8 *Ibid.*, 26–27.

9 *Ibid.*, 43–44.

Indigeneity and the claiming of Aztlán as a mythic homeland were central to early Chicano nationalism and guiding principles of the Chicano civil rights movement, *el movimiento*. Chicano identity politics recognized and embraced an Indigenous past and cultural heritage while simultaneously asserting that conflict and contact with European invaders gave birth to the Chicano people.

Pérez further asserts that “Indigeneity, as an epistemology” is both central to the work of a number of Chicana feminists and has been “used [...] to critique the masculinism and heterosexism at the heart of the Chicano nation.”<sup>10</sup> Jim Cocola also contextualizes Anzaldúa within the history of the Chicano movement and her upbringing in a place “outside the purview of most U.S. literary and cultural histories,” a place filled with thousands of years of ancestry “long before it was reconfigured as Spanish, Mexican, Texan, or American land.”<sup>10</sup> He warns against thinking of hybridity in terms of mixing or melting, explaining that Anzaldúa’s project is about differences that often “scarcely overlap”<sup>11</sup> and that it’s important to recognize “incompatible inheritances” and potentially “competing claims.”<sup>12</sup> This more spatial concept results in greater recognition of the simultaneous existence of the incompatible, and their negotiation becomes the process of developing the critical, *mestiza* consciousness.

One difficulty, however, of this personalized, non/narrative presentation of such disparate experiences, which also becomes a wider theoretical lens, is potential criticism waged against Anzaldúa for appropriating Indigenous material history or simplifying complex histories of many different tribes and lineages. In an interview published in 2003, Anzaldúa speaks honestly to these concerns:

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10 Domino Rene Pérez, “New Tribalism and Chicana/o Indigeneity in the Work of Gloria Anzaldúa,” in *Routledge Handbook of Chicana/o Studies*, eds. Francisco A. Lomeli, Denise A. Segura, and Elyette Benjamin-Labarthe (New York: Routledge, 2019), 245.

11 *Ibid.*, 144.

12 *Ibid.*, 148.

I'm afraid that what I say may unwittingly contribute to the misappropriation of Native cultures, that I (and other Chicanas) will inadvertently contribute to the cultural erasure, silencing, invisibility, racial stereotyping, and disenfranchisement of people who live in real Indian bodies.<sup>13</sup>

Considering the danger of such appropriation, "especially in terms of Native artifacts, rituals, and kinship formations, [which] is a serious concern in the face of detribalization," Pérez asks, "how does one acknowledge or even begin to claim or account for Indigenous heritage without erasing or disenfranchising living tribal communities?"<sup>14</sup> Although Pérez is focusing on Anzaldúa's idea of "new tribalism," which is a kind of praxis for hybrid, intersectional ways of theorizing and practicing identity that Anzaldúa developed sometime after publishing *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the question is important for us as readers to keep in mind. While her internalized and lived history of Indigeneity is personal and a core part of her Chicana identity, we also need to acknowledge the significance of "'documented' histories and [...] the relationships between Indians and Chicanas/os"<sup>15</sup> in order to pay more attention to the violence, essentializing, and erasing of multifaceted Indigenous experiences.

This is also why geographical situatedness, both literal and figurative, is so central to *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Aída Hurtado writes that Anzaldúa's childhood experiences contributed to the development of her "borderlands theory," which also helped her to make sense of her own past and personal identity, and further that those "insights help us understand and theorize about the experiences of individuals who are exposed to contradictory

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13 Gloria Anzaldúa, Simon J. Ortiz, Inéz Hernández-Avila, and Domino Pérez, "Speaking across the Divide," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 15, nos. 3/4 (Fall 2003/Winter 2004): 12, quoted in Pérez, "New Tribalism and Chicana/o Indigeneity," 247.

14 Pérez, "New Tribalism and Chicana/o Indigeneity," 250–51.

15 *Ibid.*, 252.

social systems.”<sup>16</sup> Anzaldúa shows us how what she “termed ‘la facultad’ (ability or gift)” or “the agility to navigate and challenge linear conceptions of social reality” is developed by “individuals (primarily women) who are exposed to multiple social worlds, as defined by cultures, languages, social classes, sexualities, nation-states, and colonization.”<sup>17</sup> Anzaldúa’s “*meztizaje*” then becomes a kind of process and praxis that critiques hierarchal power structures and imagines non-hierarchal alternatives. In rearticulating cultural narratives and Indigenous, Chicana histories, Anzaldúa generates a creative, biographical, and theoretical mapping that may be both flawed and beautiful,<sup>18</sup> and that opens space for interrogation within writing that performs multi-layered hybridity. The text, like identity, like *mestizaje*, “is a dynamic process, constantly changing, constantly evolving.”<sup>19</sup> The processes of construction become a journey through the past and present and envision potential, alternative futures narrated by hybrid voices.

Before arriving at this new way of identifying, Anzaldúa engages a kind of Kristevan semiotic practice of linguistic disruption and subversion. For Kristeva, in the semiotic or pre-Oedipal space, there is no distinction between feminine and masculine. The writing in “La herencia de Coatlicue / The Coatlicue State,” the fourth section in “*Atravesando Fronteras / Crossing Borders*,” can be said to exist in that pre-Oedipal space before the social, patriarchal, religious, and hetero-normative formations and traditions of cultural identity take hold. Anzaldúa employs the figure of Coatlicue, an Aztec earth goddess who wears a serpent skirt and whose head is encircled by the joined heads of two snakes. Coatlicue represents the source of life and death, creation and destruction, nourishing and devouring:

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16 Aída Hurtado, “The Landscapes and Language of Chicana Feminisms,” in *Routledge Handbook of Chicana/o Studies*, eds. Lomeli, Segura, and Benjamin-Labarthe, 336.

17 Ibid.

18 Pérez, “New Tribalism and Chicana/o Indigeneity,” 251.

19 Ibid., 243.

## protean being

dark dumb windowless no moon glides  
 across the stone the night sky alone alone  
 no lights just mirror walls obsidian smoky in the  
 mirror she sees a woman with four heads the heads  
 turning round and round spokes of a wheel her neck  
 is an axle she stares at each face each wishes the  
 other not there the obsidian knife in the air<sup>20</sup>

We can read “protean” in the sense of “coming first,” or “primordial,” and in taking on different forms, shapes, and meanings or exhibiting variety or diversity. Before linguistic and social symbolic structure becomes dominant, the figure of Coatlique functions both in its movement into the pre-gendered, pre-patriarchal — what Anzaldúa calls the underworld — and represents the contemporary moment of heterogeneity and possibility in the opening of the language of the text at hand. Apparent is the visual presentation of the language on the page in which the words flow yet don’t move smoothly. The varied spacing between words creates a kind of tentative movement; both the page and wherever the narrator is fearfully attempting to go are unfamiliar alternatives to the types of knowing that have come before.

Simultaneously, in the passage above, we might note the connection between the mutable “protean”; the darkness of night in which there are “no lights just mirror walls”; and the mirrors that are “smoky.” Yet “she sees a woman with four heads,” as if she sees the multiple heads of herself, while “each wishes the other not there.” It is at this point that the narrator realizes there is no going back to some single sense of unified self (indeed there has never been), but instead:

inside her  
 head the cracks ricocheting bisecting

<sup>20</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 63.

crisscrossing she hears the rattlesnakes stirring in  
a jar being fed with her flesh she listens to the  
seam between dusk and dark<sup>21</sup>

Coatlíque, the snake woman, represents the potential explosion, disruption, and fragmentation that begins first with cracks that then multiply. After “she bends to catch a feather of herself,” she wonders:

all the feathers      put them in the jar      how to get back  
full circle and back      dark      windowless      the rattling  
glides across the night sky      night sky      night<sup>22</sup>

The mirrors may represent “seeing and being seen” while the darkness of night allows for movement, subjective expression, and an alternative to the space of unrecognizability which she also explores in a later passage:

She has this fear      that she has no names      that she  
has many names      that she doesn't know her names  
[...]

She has this fear that when she does  
reach herself she turns around to embrace herself a  
lion's or witch's or serpent's head will turn around  
swallow her and grin She has this fear that if she digs  
into herself she won't find anyone  
[...]

that she won't find the way back<sup>23</sup> She has this fear

The problem at the root of this fear is the historical oppression of gender, difference, and subjective identity which has been in-

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 63–64.

23 Ibid., 65.



ternalized by the narrator here and illustrated in the repetition of the self as unknown. Having no name or having many names designated by outside forces — such as cultural narratives or social expectations — both ultimately lead to being unrecognized. Following Butler, naming can be a result of being identified within the parameters of a system that doesn't recognize one's experience. She "may [...] feel that the terms by which [I] am recognized make life unlivable."<sup>24</sup> The challenge lies in finding the ability to articulate one's experiences when there is no available language for doing so. For Anzaldúa's narrator, this seeming impossibility of recognition nonetheless leads her to "the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living."<sup>25</sup>

Coatlicue, for Anzaldúa, becomes a state or practice or even a way of life which can, as she explains, "disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life," and it can offer time and breadth for the "psyche" to "assimilate previous experiences and process the changes."<sup>26</sup> It is a practice or strategy utilizing both form and content whose goal is not necessarily a traditional kind of coherent "sense" but one that allows for "repressed energy" and the ability to "cross the river, to take that flying leap into the dark [...] into the fecund cave of her imagination."<sup>27</sup> Anzaldúa explains these ideas further:

I try to give a term, to find a language for my ideas and concepts that comes from the indigenous part of me rather than from the European part, so I come up with Coatlicue, la facultad, la frontera, and nepantla — concepts that mean: "Here's a little nugget of a system of knowledge that's different from the Euro-American." This is my hit on it, but it's also a mestizo/mestiza, cognitive kind of perception, so therefore

24 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

25 Ibid.

26 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 68.

27 Ibid., 71.

this ideology or this little nugget of knowledge is both indigenous and western. It's a hybridity, a mixture, because I live in this liminal state in between worlds, in between realities, in between systems of knowledge, in between symbology systems.<sup>28</sup>

The range of forms on the page act as ways of being in this liminal space, both between and simultaneously a part of these disparate elements, and it takes us as readers out of our expectations for assimilated ideas in narratively cohesive prose and into a kind of alternative between-ness.

In "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," in addition to the inclusion of different kinds of Spanish, English, and Indigenous languages, Anzaldúa speaks to the gendering of language and thereby subjects through language structures, vocabularies, and practices that perpetuate gender roles and hierarchies. Different kinds or uses of language can also resist and rebel. For example, she uses *nosotras* instead of the default masculine *nosotros*, or speaking in Pachuco as a kid which was considered "a language of rebellion, both against Standard Spanish and Standard English. It is a secret language [...] made up of slang words from both English and Spanish."<sup>29</sup> Additionally, she writes,

[e]thnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to

28 Andrea A. Lunsford, "Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric: Gloria Anzaldúa on Composition and Postcoloniality," in *Race, Rhetoric, and the Postcolonial*, eds. Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 65.

29 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 78.

accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.<sup>30</sup>

And claiming identity is also a constantly shifting process:

when we know we are more than nothing, we call ourselves Mexican, referring to race and ancestry; *mestizo* when affirming both our Indian and Spanish (but we hardly ever own our Black ancestry); Chicano when referring to a politically aware people born and/or raised in the U.S.; Raza when referring to Chicanos; *Tejanos* when we are Chicanos from Texas.<sup>31</sup>

The language of identity markers and the movement or intersections between them further reiterates the nature of process versus product. Although one might become a product of one's history, location, and language, "Atravesando Fronteras / Crossing Borders" represents the potential for active and continuous processes of identification and language practices that challenge and exceed those dominant modes of subject formation.

Pushing against the boundaries of personal narrative as a genre and in response to cultural traditions and Western, hegemonic messaging, *Borderlands/La Frontera* stages the beautiful messiness of the multiple and calls for greater valuation of textured hybridity. Instead of simply refusing and rewriting, Anzaldúa creates a radically new text for her time, a genre-breaking call to reconceptualize the personal as political. And she offers a future vision that centers the care and tending of the fragmented and disparate as social and cultural values instead of as things to be silenced, hidden, or narratively assimilated. At the beginning of "The Path of the Red and Black Ink," Anzaldúa offers a Mexican saying, "[o]ut of poverty, poetry; out of suffering, song," noting a turn toward possibility and new futures. She writes,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 85.

the ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman.

In looking at this book that I am almost finished writing, I see a mosaic pattern (Aztec-like) emerging, a weaving pattern, thin here, thick there. I see a preoccupation with the deep structure, the underlying structure, with the gesso underpainting that is red earth, black earth.[...] I see a hybridization of metaphor, different species of ideas popping up here, popping up there, full of variations and seeming contradictions [...]. This almost finished product seems an assemblage, a montage, a beaded work with several leitmotifs and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance. [...] This female being is angry, sad, joyful, is *Coatlicue*, dove, horse, serpent, cactus. Though it is a flawed thing — a clumsy, complex, groping blind thing — for me it is alive, infused with spirit.<sup>32</sup>

Instead of “managing” conflict or working toward “mastery in content, technique, feeling,” she expounds upon the marginal, feminine, queer, and linguistically maligned. She celebrates “Aztec-like” weavings and hybrid manifestations, creating an alternative that responds to “ethnocentrism” and “the tyranny of Western aesthetics.”<sup>33</sup> Later, she continues,

[w]hen I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heard — a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 88–89.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 95.

This autobiographical text, like the future, is inclusive, queer, blended, prosaically poetic, multi-lingual, and alternatively-narrated. Jane Caputi describes the work as a kind of creation myth for the future that might open a gateway, “allowing for an emergence of new ways of sensing, feeling and knowing” and with the “potency/power to shift the shape of things to come.”<sup>35</sup>

In this geographical model of other-narrated identity, the pre-oedipal and primordial at and between borders offer Anzaldúa the means to witness the interstices of history, tradition, personal politics, and collective identity. The borderlands shift contexts, moving within and among various landscapes and topographies. The “New Mestiza” is not a final answer, but a beginning that is always still in process, a place of continual negotiation, “[c]radled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems.”<sup>36</sup> And further,

[t]hat third element is a new consciousness — a mestiza consciousness — and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm.

[...] A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.<sup>37</sup>

Anzaldúa attests to the power of the text as political action, and to non/narrative practice as a world-changing paradigm. Her vision is no less than a future world free of literal and figurative rape, violence, and war, a future in which, through this shift in consciousness, history in its messy details can exist produc-

35 Jane Caputi, “Shifting the Shapes of Things to Come: The Presence of the Future in the Philosophy of Gloria Anzaldúa,” in *Entre Mundos/among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 192.

36 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 100.

37 *Ibid.*, 101–2.

tively alongside the present. And in this new paradigm, previously silenced, contradictory, and hybrid voices will be heard and heeded.



## Landscapes of Apology: Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS*

Written from a present tense, first-person perspective, Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* is a hybrid, poetic work that is contextualized by the continuing effects of colonization on contemporary Native lives and cultures. Considering how historical narrativizing and the creation of official treaties and government documents continue to fall short, this book confronts historical violence and the silencing of Native voices in a personal-is-political way. Long Soldier invites readers in, Native and non-Native alike, to see and acknowledge the harm done. And she creates an other narrative, a story that puts language into action by way of formal strategies on the page and that exposes truths often otherwise ignored.

At the center of *WHEREAS*, as Long Soldier says in an interview with Krista Tippet, is a piece which captures an apology Long Soldier's father made one day at the breakfast table. He is sorry that he was missing for so much of her life while she was growing up.<sup>1</sup> The language and structure of the prose poem capture the intensity of the experience, in sound and feeling. And in its unexpected power, the apology erased the hurt and loss that had come before, in effect marking a place of beginning anew. In the poem and in the conversation, she is telling us that is what

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1 Layli Long Soldier, *WHEREAS* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017), 65.



an apology should be and do. An apology does nothing if it is only words and no action. An apology is also about mending or building a relationship. If there's no hope for a sustainable relationship going forward, then maybe there's no need for an apology. Relationships are built on words and actions, recognition of one and another, on trust and reciprocity.

Earlier in the conversation with Tippet, Long Soldier references a video she had seen, a recording of an interview with a Native woman whose name and tribe she couldn't recall. This woman, who, after the Canadian National Apology to the First Nations People, was asked if anything had changed.

And she said, in her opinion, no. Things had not really changed. But in just very, very simple terms, she said, "[y]ou know, if you want things to change, all you have to do is begin by honoring your treaties and doing what you said you would do." But I think there has to be a kind of trust building in order for any kind of apology to be effective, whether it's interpersonal or at a national level.<sup>2</sup>

Constructed broadly as a response to the US Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans, the hybrid and formally innovative poems in *WHEREAS* reflect on personal relationships, the effects of history in the present, and on the role or act of apology. Regarding the writing of the book, Long Soldier, who is a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation explains,

I did not want to jump back 100 years. I think, so often, that's really a temptation to do when it comes to anything that has to do with Native issues, Native rights, or history [...] I really wanted it to be grounded in the now, at least within my own

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2 Layli Long Soldier, "The Freedom of Real Apologies," interview by Krista Tippet, *On Being*, March 30, 2017, <https://onbeing.org/programs/layli-long-soldier-the-freedom-of-real-apologies-oct2018/>.

lifetime. And I wanted as much as possible to avoid this sort of nostalgic portraiture of a Native life, my life.<sup>3</sup>

Grounded in the present tense, the narrator nonetheless carries a kind of genealogical weight of historical trauma, voiced through multiple registers of personal story and the re-narration of historical events.

The first half of *WHEREAS*, titled, “These Being the Concerns,” locates a personal that is a part of an often mis-narrated larger collective whose individual stories have often been ignored. It interrogates the acceptance of history as told by the colonizers. And it figuratively mimics the structure of the apology process. If there is an apology that means there must be a recognition that there is something to apologize for, and that those deserving of the apology will have a list of “concerns” to be addressed. The concerns in this first half of the book though are not a coherent list of wrongs to be righted. They are more like constellations of the effects of marginalization over centuries, captured in personal poetic moments of story and reflection, many of which don’t explicitly make any historical references. *WHEREAS* includes poems as disparate resonances that cannot be coherently narrated, drawing attention to the fact — which will become even more clear in the second half of the book — that the writers of the Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans don’t comprehend what their document is trying and failing to perform. An apology should address, if not reverse or right, the wrong done.

The short piece which opens the book foreshadows a story to come later and asks readers to imagine some of the details of this history from a personal perspective.

Now  
make room in the mouth  
for grassesgrassesgrasses<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 5.

The piece that follows, “Ĥe Sápa” is in five parts and refers to the Black Hills. Land that included the Black Hills, in part of what is now South Dakota and Wyoming, was promised to the Sioux people with the signing of the Fort Laramie Treaty in 1868. As reservation land, it was much smaller than the spaces among which the tribes had traditionally moved, and after the Battle of Little Bighorn, became even smaller. Looking to explore the area for gold and take control of the Black Hills, Custer’s army invaded and was defeated in the Battle in 1876. But that was a short-lived victory for the Lakota, Arapaho, and other tribes of the Sioux Nation since the Black Hills were nonetheless seized by the us. not long after. Many Native tribes with ancestral ties to the land continue today to argue for the us government to honor the terms of the Laramie Treaty.

In “Ĥe Sápa” part “One,” Long Soldier’s narrator explains:

Ĥe is a mountain as hé is a horn that comes from a shift in the river, throat to mouth. Followed by sápa, a kind of black sleek in the rise of both. [...] Its rank is a mountain and must live as a mountain, as a black horn does from base to black horn tip. See it as you come, you approach. To remember it, this is like gravel.<sup>5</sup>

Gravel is like a sieve, water passes through it, and it’s hard to walk on. Or when you walk on it, the stones push away and immediately fill back in with each step. And remembering, maybe, is like how gravel fills in or how the water filters through. As Crystal Alberts writes, some of the pieces in “These Being the Concerns” seem “designed to convey multiple layers of meaning through their visual form.”<sup>6</sup> In “Three,” Long Soldier creates a visual square on the page, each line of the square a re-ordered version of the phrase on top: “[t]his is how you see me the space

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>6</sup> Crystal Alberts, “Review of ‘WHEREAS,’ by Layli Long Soldier,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 117–21; Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 8.

in which to place me.” The inside of the square is empty, and as Alberts suggests,

[d]eceptively simple, the work invokes the boundaries of a reservation, implies the destruction of Indigenous cultures through the emptiness *between* the lines, emphasizes the gaps in knowledge of “you” that have helped to create this situation (represented by blank spaces *within* the lines, where some of the original thirteen words have been excluded), and calls for “you,” presumably a non-Indigenous, U.S. audience, not only to “see this space” in the poem and that within “you” but also ultimately to recognize the final omitted “me.”<sup>7</sup>

When read clockwise, the final line states, “[t]his is how to place you in the space in which to see” and the final “me” is missing. This lends to various interpretations of how “you” has replaced “me,” such as the US government dictating where Native people could live or how the taking of land was also destructive to personal and cultural identity. It might also reference damage done by the creation and perpetuation of dominant colonizer narratives, the truths of Native lives, land, and cultures erased or relegated to the margins. And in the last section of “Ĥe Sápa” we read,

Born in us, two of everything.  
 [...]
 But I’m dragging myself, the other me, every strand up to  
     the surface. I remember  
 very little. So I plunge my ear into the hollow of a black  
     horn,      listen to it speak.  
 Not one word sounds as before.  
 Circuitous      this  
 I know.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 10.

The visual image of “dragging myself, the other me” as strands to be pulled “up to the surface” evokes the physical and emotional exhaustion of learning or remembering history, of living as a citizen of two different cultures and worldviews. The challenge of holding on to Lakota history and tradition in the face of marginalization by us history and dominant cultural narratives might be like a long and winding journey with an unclear destination. The narrator reflects, at different points, on feeling like she doesn’t know enough of her Lakota language, on trying to learn about and make sense of historical treaties and us government documents, and on the killing and removal of Native tribes from their lands. The “horn” in the passage above might represent a link to the Lakota past, in which the roaming Buffalo were central to culture and survival, and in accessing other ways of knowing (“not one word sounds as before”). In this circuitry, there may not be only one way, or, in trying to make sense of these pieces, one may feel she is never on a straight path.

Throughout this first half of the book, there are long pieces broken into sections, many of which include a lot of white space on the page, potentially signifying how colonial whiteness dominates, contextualizes, pushes Native voices and language to the margins or keeps them contained within limited parameters. But Long Soldier’s language also resonates powerfully, breaking though and across the page, sometimes moving slowly or drawing our attention visually to certain words or phrases giving them greater impact. Some words and themes repeat, beginning in this first section and throughout the book, including “grasses,” “I,” “eye,” and “light.” In their conversation, Long Soldier also tells Tippet about her early interest in music and the sounds of repeated musical phrases, and we can see and feel how sound is inextricable from other ways language functions in *WHEREAS*. In the first piece of the book, for example, the repetition without space between “grassesgrassesgrasses” performs how language as spoken carries texture and sound. It’s also hard to read at first and hard to say out loud. The poem refers to the story told in “38” later in the book. After the 1858 us government reduction of Dakota land, unable to hunt and with no money to

buy food — they were never compensated for the land that was stolen — the Dakota people were starving. In response Andrew Myrick, a trader, famously said, “[i]f they are hungry, let them eat grass.”

When Myrick’s body was found,

his mouth was stuffed

with grass.

I am inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem.<sup>9</sup>

One might say, poetic justice. A few lines later we read, “[t]hings are circling back again” and “if I wish to exit, I must leap.” There is some narrative circling in this poem, as in the book. Many readers likely won’t recognize the initial reference to the Myrick story, but if we look back we can see how the ideas began to resonate much earlier.

After having immersed ourselves as readers in some of the ideas that circulate throughout the book, when we encounter the apology at the breakfast table a bit more than halfway through, we might feel a kind of collective emotion, built over time, the weight of history shared through an intimate personal story of apology. Or as the narrator says at the end of the (untitled) breakfast apology poem, “because of a lifelong stare down / because of centuries of sorry.”<sup>10</sup> The power lies in the accumulation leading to the moment of apology, in the potential for the undoing of past wrongs, and in the intensity of language contained in the prose block on the page.

Circling back to another example intertwining the personal and collective, early in the book, the piece “Look” begins,

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9 Ibid., 53.

10 Ibid., 65; the forward slash is included in Long Soldier’s prose line.

the light

grass

body

whole

wholly moves

a green hill<sup>11</sup>

The grasses and changing light literally and figuratively might represent the relationship with the land that for Lakota people is especially significant, and one that is also infected with trauma. The Myrick reference and the grasses that signify survival can be read as metonymic for the historical violence against Native people that leaves them with nothing more than grass, if even that, to eat. But before reading “Look” for an audience at the Radcliffe Institute, Long Soldier also explains that the feel, smell, and sight of the grasses are important to her relationship to home, and when going to South Dakota from the four corners area of the southwest, the first thing she would do is grab a handful of grass and pull apart the strands.<sup>12</sup> It’s an important addition for interpreting the poem, and makes the references to the grasses and the simple narrative of Myrick as colonial oppressor more complex. Their land was stolen, and the Native people starved nearly to death, but the land also is still their home; the grasses representing that connection to home as well as the historical trauma. Further, the narrator tells us,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>12</sup> Layli Long Soldier, “Layli Long Soldier ‘WHEREAS,’” at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, March 22, 2018, <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/video/layli-long-soldier-whereas>.

I

sentence

to life

less light

quick dead

grass<sup>13</sup>

and then later asks:

what have I

done

[...]

*why*thisimpulse

to

shake the dead<sup>14</sup>

Like shaking the dead whose stories have been silenced and buried, the details often fall outside of dominant narratives, or ways of telling, and threaten to destabilize narrative cohesion. And in that narrative rupture, silenced voices might resonate. Going back into memories and histories can elicit pain and trauma, and it also can bring the real stories of real lives to the surface, back into circulation.

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13 Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 12.

14 *Ibid.*, 13.



Later, in one section of the longer piece, "Diction," Long Soldier again centers the "I," noting that it is both "a vowel / a speaker" and

I  
denote  
a vowel  
ego

having the shape  
of literary  
referring

narrator  
to himherself<sup>15</sup>

Although the book may be read as a poetic memoir, in recognizing the personal "I" as literary narrator, we are reminded that a literary text, expressing ideas by way of formal, aesthetic practices, can offer insights that a more straightforward nonfiction narration may not. The poetic narrator in *WHEREAS* focuses our attention on the text itself as a relationship between forms and contents of personal and cultural histories. If Long Soldier doesn't claim to speak for universal Lakota or Native experience, this book nonetheless extends its reach into hearts and minds of readers and adds to the archives of other personal or historical accounts. And the stories and perspectives shared through an array of forms on the page fill in some of the space of empty rhetorical gestures with alternatively narrated detail.

The long poem "Vaporative" again mingles "light," "I," and "eye," and incorporates writing process, remembering, and word- and sound-play throughout. When I search for meanings of "vaporative," Google wants to give me definitions for "evaporative." The subtle shortening of the word to "vapor" signifies a state between or made of both air and liquid, that might be

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 21.

suspended and dispersed, by which light may be blocked or refracted. Evaporate is an action; vaporative feels more like a state of being or some kind of figurative/physical space.

I follow that light  
 capacity that I have  
 cup-sized capture  
 snap-like seizure I  
 remember small  
 is less to forget  
 less to carry  
 [...]  
 I blink eye blink  
 at me to look  
 at me in  
 light eye  
 look twice  
 and I eye  
 alight  
 again.<sup>16</sup>

A later section of “Vaporative” begins with “*example*,” and an expository, prose-block of text describes the narrator’s relation to the word “*opaque*” in a way that others, myself included, might relate to. Like this narrator, “I have always wanted *opaque* to mean see-through, transparent. I’m disheartened to learn it means the opposite.” Recognizing the power of language to effect change in even a single word, she explains, “I understand the need to define as a need for stability [...]. One word can be a poem believe it, one word can destroy a poem dare I. Say I am writing to penetrate the opaque but I confuse it too often. I negotiate instinct when a word of lightful meaning flips under / buries me in the work of blankets.”<sup>17</sup> Understanding or expectation can turn or be turned, be buried under blankets. The opti-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 27; Long Soldier includes the forward slash in the piece.

mistic lightness may be made obscure, dense, or impenetrable so the light can't get through, and so one can't see the light.

Returning to the grasses and before ending "These Being the Concerns" with "38," the poem "Steady Summer" pulls the narrator back out from under the blankets and into the visual and sonic:

grass songs  
 a grass chorus moves *shhhhh*  
 through half-propped  
 windows I swallow  
 grass scent the solstice  
 makes a mind  
 wide makes it  
 oceanic blue a field in crests  
 swirling gyres the moving  
 surface fastened  
 in June light  
 [...]

*shhhh*

this grass*shhhh*

*shhhh*

who have I become<sup>18</sup>

This question of becoming or existing simultaneously within the lightness and darkness — of living as a multi-lingual, dual citizen, of interior and exterior, of self and other — operates in the flow throughout the book and among the line breaks, white space, and visual representation of language on the page.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 31–33.

In writing on *WHEREAS*, much has been said about “38,” which narrates the story of the Dakota 38 executed by the US government.<sup>19</sup> It’s also strategically placed at the end of “These Being the Concerns” and just before “WHEREAS,” which is more directly in response to the Congressional Resolution of Apology document. As a seemingly straightforward turn from the more challenging poetic forms before and after, “38” can also be read as a hinge between the “concerns” and the “apology.” It offers a succinct narration of an egregious and violent history for which the apology seems too little too late and is, in any case, rhetorically devoid of any reference to real action. The first half of the book is like a poetic articulation of the inarticulable experience of history alive in the present. And in a way, “38” is *haŋké*, “[a] piece combined with others to make up a whole. Some but not all of something [...] a piece or a part of anything.”<sup>20</sup> It functions as part of, and stands in for, the larger history. Within the “concerns” we can read personal identity as a continuous negotiation between Lakota and colonial cultures through history and the contemporary, “s p l i t”<sup>21</sup> like the blades of grass pulled up out of the ground. And in “38” the narrator articulates trauma in narrative form in a way that both utilizes colonizer language (“proper” English sentence structure and grammatical expectations) and also satirizes it, offering meta-commentary and emphasis on certain details. She explains, “I will compose each sentence with care, by minding what the rules of writing dictate,” and says, “I feel most responsible to the orderly sentence; conveyor of thought.”<sup>22</sup> As a reader, this sentiment actually feels more like a critique of narrative expectations, since the rest of the book often casts “proper” sentences aside for ways of conveying thought that don’t rely on rules, or that convey by alter-

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19 Published in 2017, writing on *WHEREAS* mainly includes book reviews. Most reviews that I read mention or reflect in detail on “38,” in part, I think, because it’s the most straightforwardly written and also because it narrates an especially violent piece of history.

20 Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 64.

21 *Ibid.*, 12.

22 *Ibid.*, 49.

native means. It may also be true that the narrator realizes “the orderly sentence” is an effective way to get more readers to tune in and listen, that she sees the power in utilizing that as a political strategy. But even in this “orderly” form, it turns out this history isn’t digestible, or orderly. How does one reconcile the government-ordered execution of thirty-eight Dakota people, as the narrator explains, within days of Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation? “In the preceding sentence,” she says, “I italicize ‘same week’ for emphasis.”<sup>23</sup> It looks at first like an ideological incongruity, and the story is accidentally or otherwise ignored in the history books. Yet while Lincoln may be praised by some as an anti-slavery hero, “38” critiques both actions as political: the Emancipation having little to do with real justice for Black people and the government’s assumption that few would notice the execution of Native people at that time.

The long section, “Whereas Statements,” that begins after “38,” opens with a reflection on what an apology is or feels like, evoking both the physiological and linguistic.

WHEREAS when offered an apology I watch each move-  
 ment the shoulders  
 high or folding, tilt of the head both eyes down or straight  
 through  
 me, I listen for cracks in knuckles or in the word choice,  
 what is it  
 that I want? *To feel* and mind you I feel from the senses — I  
 read  
 each muscle, I ask the strength of the gesture to move like a  
 poem.  
 [...]  
 If I’m transformed by language, I am often  
 crouched in footnote or blazing in title.  
 Where in the body do I begin;<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 61.

The narrator asks, “what is it / that I want?” and is answered a few pages later with her father’s apology. Like her father breaking down at the breakfast table, “I’d never heard him cry, didn’t recognize the symptoms,” this document of apology should act in a way not done before, one that would lead to something like the narrator’s response to her father: “*it’s okay I said it’s over now I meant it / because of our faces blankly / because of a lifelong stare down / because of centuries in sorry*.”<sup>25</sup> Simultaneously active and slowing, the density of prose in this piece might otherwise make us read faster—to feel the frenetic intensity—but the included slashes slow us down to see and feel and let it sink in. The language and structure hold us in the interstices of the personal-political-historical and the embodied trauma and gesture of apology on the page.

The “Whereas Statements” critique the congressional resolution language, processing and responding to the inadequacy of the apology and its delivery as well as the “language, crafting, and arrangement of the written document.”<sup>26</sup> At the Radcliffe reading, Long Soldier says that when she found out about the resolution, she was frustrated. And realizing there were many things she couldn’t do, one thing she could do was write. In writing this frustration, *WHEREAS*, the book, negotiates the movement between language and emotion and leads readers through the form and content of a personal intervention into paternalistic government language practices and (in)action. As Katie Kane explains,

[t]he apology resolution [...] was offered in near public silence as a minor inclusion in Section 8113 in the 2010 Defense Appropriations Act [...] a textual and governmental overlap so characteristic of American colonialism that it could not be said to rise even to the level of irony. A weak apology embedded in legislative preparations for war is, in some fundamental and brutal way, an official indicator of the duality

25 Ibid., 65; Long Soldier includes the forward slashes in the text.

26 Ibid., 57.

of consciousness and the divided condition of daily life that characterizes Native American experience inside the punishing map of the United States.<sup>27</sup>

Nearly at the end of the book, the shorter section “Resolutions” explicitly lifts and turns language from the congressional document’s “Acknowledgement and Apology.” Much more visual on the page and employing more white space than the dense “Whereas Statements,” Long Soldier pulls apart the government’s own words and phrases. In “(2)” she repeats “this land” across a page. In “(3)” she dismantles the government language: “The United States, acting through Congress — ... recognizes that there have been years of official depredations, ill-conceived policies, and the breaking of covenants by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes.” She creates a vertical, narrow line of text: “I / recognize / that<sup>1</sup> / official<sup>2</sup> / ill-<sup>3</sup> / breaking of<sup>4</sup> / the<sup>5</sup> / Indian<sup>6</sup>” and relegates the missing original words and phrases: “there have been years of,” “depredations,” “conceived policies, and the,” “covenants by,” “Federal Government regarding,” and “tribes” to footnotes.<sup>28</sup> A few pages later, the writings of two contemporary Standing Rock activists are set next to each other, further bringing the history of stolen land to light in the present.

A bit later, Long Soldier again turns the congressional resolution language against itself, changing: “[t]he United States, acting through Congress — [...] commends the State governments that have begun reconciliation efforts with recognized Indian tribes located in their boundaries and encourages all State governments similarly to work toward reconciling relationships with Indian tribes within their boundaries” into “I commend the inventive crafting of a national resolution so mindful of —,” and then beginning with the word “boundaries” the government language is rearranged and repeated down the page. Language

27 Katie Kane, “On ‘WHEREAS’ by Layli Long Soldier,” *The Georgia Review*, Fall 2017, <https://thegeorgiareview.com/posts/on-whereas-by-layli-long-soldier/>.

28 Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*, 90–91.

contained in a vertical, rectangular text box on the right side of the page begins with “boundaries” and then expands the phrase “with recognized Indian tribes located in their boundaries,” in reverse and repeating “boundaries,” and then adding one word or phrase at a time, moving down and to the right like a list. And to the left of the text box on the same page, the first word, “boundaries” again begins at the top and the lines incorporating the government language lengthen as they move down and out to the left. As new words are added to the beginning of each line, many lines repeat the phrase: “Indian tribes within their boundaries,” until in the middle of the page the phrase “State governments that have begun reconciliation efforts”<sup>29</sup> is rearranged and repeated down the rest of the page. The foregrounding of “boundaries” pushing out onto the page, and the passive, pacifying, and empty “have begun reconciliation efforts” ends this poem in a kind of technical knockout. The apology farce is no longer believable, if it ever was. The gesture toward reconciliation never really one of reciprocity or redress.

In her interview with Tippet, Long Soldier also tells a story about a teacher she had at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) who suggested that she let go of the strong focus on imagery that she learned as an undergraduate student writing poetry, because by making the language too beautiful, the teacher was worried her work would “lose its teeth.” In the conversation, Long Soldier repeats that she is writing from her personal perspective and not trying to essentialize or write for all Lakota or all Native people, that she can really only speak for herself.<sup>30</sup> She seems to be echoing a concern that is complex in its manifestations, a concern that Craig Womack discusses in his writing on Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop*, which is focused on gender and often considered the first book-length, academic work of Native literary criticism. Allen foregrounds Native voices by way of literary texts and practices but at times presents somewhat broad generalizations of Native people, drawing critique

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>30</sup> Long Soldier, “The Freedom of Real Apologies.”



for essentializing. Though as Womack writes, it's not simply one or the other way of reading:

It is important to note that women of color made significant contributions to gender theory because of their insistence that not all women are the same, since factors such as race and class affect how women experience both oppression and resistance.

[...]

If Allen has problems working out her own relationship to issues of authenticity and identity, so do the rest of us who call ourselves Native critics. The notion of just what makes tribal literature tribal is a vexing problem that ends us a focus, in one way or another [...]. It is much easier to describe the tribalness of tribal literature as a process than to pin down a definition; the frustrating paradox has to do with the fact that one is, nonetheless, often in the position of having to come up with a definition.<sup>31</sup>

*WHEREAS* can be read as such an example of process versus definition. Long Soldier captures a complex Native voice but doesn't essentialize that into a simplistic narrative of "tribal" experience, nor does she make it "beautiful" in a way that alleviates the frustration motivating the book as a response and critique. Offering her personal perspective, Long Soldier crafts a powerful testament to the consequences of the historical disregard of Native people that is aggravated instead of soothed by the Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans.

Long Soldier's subject-in-process throughout *WHEREAS* relies on innovative, formal practices in ways that avoid essentializing narratives or stereotypical snapshots. In her essay,

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31 Craig S. Womack, "A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism between 1986 and 1997," in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, eds. Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 22–23; see also Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions: With a New Preface* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

"The Fourth Wave," written before the publication of *WHEREAS*, Erika T. Wurth writes about Long Soldier and other poets as examples of a contemporary "Fourth Wave" of Native writers "speaking from a wide range of aesthetic, tribal, and experiential perspectives." Earlier "waves" she suggests, included "writers of the Native American Renaissance" such as "Simon Ortiz, Joy Harjo, and Louise Erdrich" and "heralded by the appearance of N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn*." Later writers include Sherman Alexie and others whose work may be characterized by a "a kind of gritty, detailed realism" and in which "history, language, and identity are used more in terms of back-drop" while "irony, humor, and sarcasm [...] are used in an almost postmodern / self-aware way." And she writes that, while teaching at IAIA, she saw many writers wanting "to be allowed to write without the traditional burdens of Native American literary politics."<sup>32</sup>

Wurth reflects on the relationship between form and content, particularly for writers from this lineage who are interested in genre, experiment, and aesthetic/formal practice. She cites Sherwin Bitsui as "a more experimental / deep image / epic poet" and points out that "his work was Diné in form, not just content / concept" particularly because "much like many Native languages, Diné is a highly verbed language, unlike English, a language where nouns dominate. In Diné living things are imbued with a kind of dynamism, so that one thing turns easily into another."<sup>33</sup> Instead of exploring this idea more deeply or offering examples of that kind of formal "dynamism," Wurth moves into a discussion of narrative and confessional poetry and reiterates a divide between identity/culture/politics/representation and form or aesthetic practice. Although Wurth cites Bitsui's dynamic use of verb structures, she stops short of exploring, in detail, how form can function as content. She writes:

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32 Erika T. Wurth, "The Fourth Wave," *Waxwing*, Fall 2015, <http://waxwing-mag.org/archive/07/writing.php?item=344>.

33 Ibid.

In this sense I could understand why experimental [...] aesthetics have become so appealing to young Native American artists. Even though it is yet another form arising from White Academia [...] it is one that buries the identity markers as deeply as it can, so that those who would tear our work apart so as to make cohesive, solipsistic, academic, reductive, content-driven arguments will find themselves without the traditional markers that academia has become so comfortable with when it comes to writing by Native Americans.<sup>34</sup>

Understandably uncomfortable with the historical relationship, or lack thereof, between white academics and Native writing, Wurth nonetheless seems to reduce the power of Native writers to utilize experimental practice on their own terms and in relation to identity and politics on the page. However, formal innovation can be used to complicate and spatialize identity, culture, and politics and might be read as an active defense against expectations or against white-academic labeling and categorization. For many writers, innovation is not about suppressing the details of identity and real experience or allowing those details to only slip through the layers of text subconsciously or surreptitiously. In fact, as we see in *WHEREAS*, form is often inextricable from content, bringing together the *how* and the *what* of real lives and histories on the page. Long Soldier shows us how form can be used to articulate that which has otherwise been elided and as a way of helping us see history in the present in its complex juxtapositions and incoherencies.

Wurth further asks readers to reflect on a false choice: “[d]o we live under the radar, in a sense, with experimental/language poetry” or “do we make it loud and proud with content-driven confessional poetry?”<sup>35</sup> The simplicity of this binary makes it difficult to consider the work of so many poets, including that of Joy Harjo for example, cited by Wurth as a key second wave poet, who although not especially formally experimental none-

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

theless complicates Native voice and identity through attention to formal practice throughout her work. I don't mean to criticize Wurth's arguments, but to point out that there seems to be a missed opportunity in the essay to reflect on the purposeful and intimate interactions between form and content in the work of many of the writers she cites. She writes:

All of these forms, it could be argued, do not come from us. However [...] if you look at the poets coming out of this newest wave, you can see that they are beginning to use poetic form accurately, and not as a crutch: narrative poems are not just confessional blathering — they are image-driven. Language poems are not just clever ways of playing with words on a page — they are carefully wrought sentences, which add up to a bigger, beautiful sensory experience. There are still hogans, and sweetgrass, and rez cars — but, they are there not to just showcase the authenticity of the poet, but there when they actually add to the beauty of the poem.<sup>36</sup>

In a way, I think she is trying to argue that form can, in fact, be used as means to represent more complex identities and to (potentially) escape reductionist readings that rely on stereotypical tropes and paternalistic narrating of Native experience. But it's also problematic to reduce form to beauty, or to consider beauty as separate from the cultural, historical, or political. A more expanded version of this might consider how formal practices can be used to break through and away from colonial expectation and the regulation of language systems and structures, and maybe these Fourth Wave and future writers are in a key position to claim, revise, or create new structures. Although Wurth is, I think, praising these contemporary writers for opening up new and bold possibilities for the literary representation of a multiplicity of Native identities and experiences, in the end she eases away from that and offers a kind of generalized conclusion that

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

does little to show the power of the dynamic aesthetic practices cited earlier:

The majority of the Fourth Wave poets I've spoken about in this essay are doing things with form that I haven't seen before; they have indeed inherited something very good. They are invested in the way that experimentation in form can simultaneously express individual poetic interest, and look to expressing the sounds and images that they as Native American poets are uniquely able to render in poetry.<sup>37</sup>

This says little to recognize the power that writers can harness through their use of innovative formal practice and interrogation of colonizer-culture narration. Going far beyond the simultaneous expression of poetic interest and the unique ways that can be voiced by Native writers, *WHEREAS* intricately centers Long Soldier's narrator as a linguistic, cultural, historical, and gendered identity, as an Oglala Lakota and US citizen, between and among different landscapes of the west and southwest. The innovative textual strategies draw out and clarify the critique of colonial domination of Native people and their stories, and act as models for re-narrating and giving voice to alternative perspectives.

Throughout *WHEREAS*, stories are told like a visual mapping of topographies as landscapes change from green to golden brown, from rocky to soft sand. And the focus all the while remains steadfast (sometimes overtly, sometimes under the surface) on the gaslighting, victim-blaming rhetoric and on the linguistic manipulation of government documents and American history as written by the colonizers. The work participates in, and contributes to, new possibilities for non/narrative, poetic representation and empowers subjective agency and Native voices in all of their many forms. In her powerful reflection on the book, Natalie Diaz tells us,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

*WHEREAS* challenges the making and maintenance of an empire by transforming the page to withstand the tension of an occupied body, country and, specifically, an occupied language. [...] The English-only power structure that once disguised American poetry is shifting, shaped by a generation of poets, Long Soldier among them, imagining their heritage languages and image systems as part of a complex linguistic and literary tradition. In *WHEREAS*, this includes acknowledging writing as a visual act in forms that take on physical boundaries like footnotes, brackets and stitching, disrupted prose blocks, poems shaped and fragmented like long blades of grass, or a poem shaped like a hammer or a box. Long Soldier reminds readers of their physical and linguistic bodies as they are returned to language through their mouths and eyes and tongues across the fields of her poems.<sup>38</sup>

Diaz invites us as readers to imagine further, to see that the *how* of stories is as important as the *what*, to see that history lives in the present. Diaz and Long Soldier show us that texts can engage in and even act as political action. Long Soldier's narrator offers us her stories, among so many other stories, that resist and speak out, that demand not only to be recognized but to be seen and heard, and that draw on the power of language and poetic practices in the journey toward new futures made of many voices.

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<sup>38</sup> Natalie Diaz, "A Native American Poet Excavates the Language of Occupation," *The New York Times*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/04/books/review/whereas-layli-long-soldier.html>.



## Postscript

As I finish the final draft of this book, we are in the midst of a pandemic that has put us at a distance from friends, family, and neighbors over prolonged periods of time. As an act of care for others, many of us have often stayed as separate as we could, an act that is also counterintuitive for those of us interested in community and collective action. The most privileged among us have, of course, enjoyed the most comfortable versions of this new way of being. The pandemic has made even more apparent the privilege gaps and the lack of equitable access to resources, the worst effects hitting the most vulnerable in our society, and in the world, the hardest. This part of things isn't new, but it's been exacerbated. White privilege parades its economic power — government officials and corporate entities pushing to reopen for business, for example, while blatantly admitting the cost in real lives — and military might. Still more money is sent to the military budget instead of to citizens and small businesses in crisis or as investments in long-term social programs. Military grade weapons, outfits, and other gear embolden police forces and even individuals self-deputized to parade their anger, angst, and racism, unchecked by seeming norms of civility or racial justice. Really, it's the perpetuation of American history, some of the same-old stories: our country founded on exploitation of resources and people, slavery and genocide. Profit and power are always placed above humanity. Only a few months



into this crisis in which a novel form of coronavirus morphed to be both infectious and deadly, some theorized that since it hit cities the hardest—and lower economic communities of color—that some in government and in places “less” affected were also less interested in dealing with it. But almost two years later, many predominantly white communities devastated by surge after surge still deny basic information and proven safety precautions. Some of the narratives that circulate literally kill us. Creating new narratives is a constant struggle, as Angela Davis might say.

If the Trump administration taught us anything, it's that as a country we haven't made as much social/cultural progress as some believed we had. And the progress that has been made has also come with a lot of back-stepping and with sometimes violent consequences: for individuals, communities, the climate, and more. The effects of this pandemic might have been reduced if, as a country, we weren't still so stuck in narratives of privilege, power, economics, and who is allowed access to those. These are intensified by a dearth of access to, and distribution of, quality journalism and credible information. By the devaluing of educational institutions including colleges and universities, and the related degrading of expertise in science, policy, and more. By the eroding and vilification of the humanities, so that instead of learning how to progress ethically, empathetically, responsibly, and with concern for all members of society we allow a tiny minority of people to control an abundance of wealth and create the “rules” of what often feels like an uncivilized society. Sometimes I wonder how we could have learned so little from history as it continues to play out perpetually in the present. And it often seems hard to image any other future, even now, when the likelihood of some different kind of future becomes clear. But the question is, what kind of future will that be?

In light of all that, it seems to me that art and literature are as important as ever. We can look to the arts to teach us about ourselves and the possibilities for our future(s). In and through literature, we learn, reflect, philosophize, and share in our hu-

manity. Our practices as writers can help us articulate ideas and affect others in the connections we make and avenues we point to for further thinking and action, and to imagine and enact the kind of world we want to see for one another.

The texts I've reflected on in this project call our attention to different ways of thinking. And even though the violence of history is still alive in the present in so many ways, there are also many smart and amazing writers offering important insights on those histories and helping to point us forward. Too often, I think, we are stuck (or feel trapped) in dominant narratives and cultural messages that tell us who and how to be, that try to convince us to remain complacent, that assert there's no use in taking action because there are few possibilities other than the status quo. But these writers, like many others out there, tell us about the importance of actively engaging hope, possibility, and potential.

I began this book by thinking about both Audre Lorde and Judith Butler and their commitments to the concept of possibility for literary and social transformation. And it's why I've chosen the included primary texts, which I see as examples of theory and action in practice. I've cited and quoted a lot in this project, from the creative texts to philosophers, historians, and others because there is so much that is already available and that we already know. We don't need to start from scratch, but maybe in some ways, we need, more than ever, to re-use, re-see, and re-invent. And because Lorde and Butler have captured so much in words that summary would do a disservice, I close out this project with these final thoughts for reimagined beginnings, and I encourage us all to work toward new futures.

Lorde writes:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of

our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experience of our daily lives.<sup>1</sup>

Butler writes:

These practices of instituting new modes of reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone. Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender. I tend to answer: Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial a bread. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, I end here with Long Soldier whose *WHEREAS* circuitously points us through past and present so that we can move forward. Acknowledging and dealing honestly with the past doesn't mean then putting it aside and forgetting, but it is a necessary, reiterative process subject to shifts in perspective and lessons learned. Holding on to the constructive and affirming aspects of our histories can also help lead us toward different potential paths, what I would call feminist futures: built with justice, equitable representation of personal stories and identities, a multiplicity of voices and cultural practices, and insightful writing that challenges us to think through all of these and more. Toward the end of the book, Long Soldier places language from two Standing Rock activists side by side:

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1 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider, Essays & Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

2 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29.

so the camp is illegal  
 we keep each accountable  
 you must have a buddy system  
 to these principles  
 someone must know when you're leaving  
 this is a ceremony  
 & when you're coming back  
 act accordingly<sup>3</sup>

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3 Layli Long Soldier, *WHEREAS* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017), 96.



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